

Vera of the Strong Heart

Marion Mole

Vera of the Strong Heart

By

Marion Mole

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York and London
The Knickerbocker Press

1910

COPYRIGHT, 1910
BY
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A MARRIAGE DE CONVENANCE	I
II. WHO IS THE HEIR?	14
III. "AS THE TWIG IS BENT"	21
IV. "WHEN THE DEVIL WAS SICK"	30
V. VERA	40
VI. THE PARTING OF THE WAYS	55
VII. "TO BE MY WIFE"	63
VIII. MRS. MANNERS INTERFERES	75
IX. CARSHALTON COURT	85
X. "PALS"	97
XI. THE LAST WORD OF LOVE	107
XII. RIVALS BECOME FRIENDS	120
XIII. THE GREAT IDEA	128
XIV. NANA THE PROPHETESS	136
XV. FAMILY LEGENDS	150
XVI. RALPH DID IT!	161

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVII. "BRUIN"	170
XVIII. ONE NEVER CAN TELL	183
XIX. ECLIPSED	193
XX. THE TWINS DECAMP	203
XXI. THE DECENCIES OF LIFE	216
XXII. CARSHALTON'S SECOND SIGHT	225
XXIII. THE PASSING OF BRUIN	240
XXIV. A DOUBLE WEDDING	250
XXV. FATHER AND SONS	263
XXVI. THE CALL OF THE SEA	278
XXVII. TOGETHER	291
XXVIII. A NEW HEIR	304

Vera of the Strong Heart

Vera of the Strong Heart

CHAPTER I

A MARIAGE DE CONVENANCE

AUGUSTUS HENRY HYDE MANDEVILLE, tenth Earl of Carshalton, Baron Mottisfont, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, and a baronet, was just as thorough-paced a rake as a man—short of complete scoundrelism—could be. A very cheerful rake, who knew what he wanted and took it, and, what is more, enjoyed it. Like many young men of birth and fortune, and like some who have neither, he felt convinced that the world was for him to play with. Quite unbeset by scruples, pleased with himself and with all the conditions of existence, he was by no means a tiresome personality. Men said of him that he was a good fellow enough, when they really meant that he was a bad lot, but attractive.

At the age of thirty Carshalton looked older, but seemed younger, than his years, being so vitally unwearied of pleasure. He was a slim

fellow, of good height, with a small head that suggested quick perception rather than intellectuality. Sallow he was, lantern-jawed, irregular-featured, with brilliant, deep-set, well-lashed eyes for a redeeming feature: eyes which lighted up with the ready smile of his thick lips over his white teeth and which seemed to have an especial message of good-will to whomsoever they looked upon. They were part of his specious charm—those beautiful kindly eyes; completing the magnetism of his manner, so that it was something of a shock to find how easily he could smile and ride away. Something of a shock, too, to find how small a gap he left behind him after all. As for that charming manner of his, an acute acquaintance said, "Carshalton's a nervy chap, you know." But this, at the time, was not recognised as good description: it was, in fact, prophecy.

At the age of thirty-five Lord Carshalton discovered that he was not immortal; and the fact surprised him into the first serious action of his life.

"Beastly bad motor smash!" he said, when the doctors had quite successfully put him together again. "I came off second-best, you know. Might not have come off at all. Makes a fellow thoughtful!"

His friends chaffed him a good deal about this new thoughtfulness of his; they gave him ad-

dresses of picturesque monasteries (and convents) and were altogether delightfully waggish and amusing. But Lord Carshalton was not worrying about his soul—far be it from him! No, the duty to which he had awakened was of the world, worldly: that of providing an heir to the Carshalton title and estates before the gods should show too irresistible a desire for his company.

He began to take this duty very seriously indeed, to the exquisite delight of his more intimate men friends, who were, perhaps, not quite of his own class and who were privately of opinion that Carshalton need not worry about leaving legalised replicas of himself so long as the devil had a hand in the marring of creation. Ah! they did not know, these outsiders; had no conception of the springs of pride and hate and love suddenly upwelling in the man. Possibly a mean pride, a mean hate, a mean love; for it was pride of birth and race; hate of the collateral branch, whose head had so deeply offended by a vulgar marriage; and it was love of the ancestral home, with all its full-mellowed beauty of heirloom and building and courtyard, its free spaces of lawn and garden, its timbered park, sweeping down to the broad rich lands lying subdued and serf-like below.

"God!" said Carshalton to himself when he returned to it. "I love it."

Yes, he loved even the much despised Georgian

wing, because a Mandeville—the family were courtiers ever—had built it. There were marks on the place of all lines of kings, from the ruined Norman tower onward. If a force could have been found to bind him there, in the big spaces of it, tradition-filled, he might have expanded and grown big-souled. But this had never dawned on him: he was not introspective. His plan of life was simple: to take and to enjoy.

And now in pursuance of this, his simple plan, he looked for a wife who should be the fitting mother for his heir and yet the least possible drag upon his personal liberty. So far as his carelessness could reason, he reasoned it out. Thus: on all counts she must be a woman of his own class; for his heir's sake she must be of normal health and appearance, yet neither so young, so pretty, nor so clever as to make an exacting wife. Motherless she must be: his scheme of life by no means included a mother-in-law. He went through half a London season quite discreetly; then suddenly married Cecilia (second daughter of the Honourable and Reverend John Lister), who was so nearly the woman he wanted that he despaired of finding a better.

No one opposed the match: a splendid one for a not too brilliant woman of twenty-eight. Why, then, did Lord Carshalton elope with Cecilia Lister? Simply because, wild to the core, he had in six weeks grown so weary of convention

that he could not endure the tedious staging of the marriage farce. He eloped to get back his freedom.

And she? This one wild thing she did, carried away by the speciousness of the man; and then relapsed into nothingness. Perhaps, poor thing! she had dreamed her dreams before marriage. After marriage she took to praying. Nana, her old nurse and very faithful friend, who came with her to Carshalton Court, knew that she prayed for a girl baby; and perhaps dimly understood why. It was Cecilia Mandeville's futile way of asserting her neglected individuality; it was the revolt of her woman's impotence against the yoke of the easy optimist, who used her so carelessly for his own ends; the half conscious warding-off of an ultimate loneliness. If Lord Carshalton had known for what she prayed, it would have tickled his sense of humour and inclined him to her. But he thought she was praying for his redemption, and this, though amusing enough, seemed to leave him his freedom very completely. Therefore when the doctors told him he might hope for an heir in six months' time, he said, "Thank Heaven!" quite piously, and ordered his valet to pack his things; and disappeared—Nana alone knew where.

For, before he went, he called Nana to him and said:

"Now, Nana,—that's your name, is n't it?—

you don't like me much, but I can trust you, eh?"

The woman was small and brown and shrivelled as a withered leaf, but she had eyes of flame and a daring tongue.

"Can those trust who are not to be trusted, my lord?" asked she.

"By Jove, I don't know, never thought of it," said he, laughing. "Let's put it another way. You love your mistress, Nana?"

"I could wish others loved her as well," the woman replied solemnly.

"That's all right," said Lord Carshalton. "Well then, Nana, I leave her in your care. I'm off, you see. I'm no good here. But I'll be back in time—I promise you that. And if I'm really wanted before,—*really* wanted, mind you—you are not to spoil my good sport for nothing—here's means of finding me."

He gave her a foreign address, which he had never given before to any one in England, and ran up-stairs to say good-bye to his wife.

"Did you not find her, my lord?" asked Nana; for he was gone but an instant.

"On her knees," said he, grimacing; and was off in his motor, waving his hand gaily to the little brown prophetess of a retainer.

Nana, shaking her head over his reprobate ways, put that scrap of paper away very carefully. And she too went up-stairs and found Lady Car-

shalton looking out upon the avenue down which the motor had disappeared; and scolded her roundly for praying for a girl.

Lord Carshalton returned to England on a breezy morning in early April. The little white horses on the Channel pranced to the whip of the wind; and as Carshalton whirled from Dover to London he saw clear, pale primroses on the edge of plantations and daffodils blowing rich and strong in farm-house gardens. Hop-gardens and ploughed lands showed green promise of another harvest, and from budding earth the larks rose to meet heaven's fitful sunlight. A fresh, clear, wind-swept England! Carshalton, who had come from hot and unholy places, bathed his soul in it. Jove! but this was pleasant! The kindly gods knew just what he wanted.

When he had washed and brushed and fed himself he went to look at the spring flowers in the Park; for, like many another rake, he had some of the simple tastes of a child. He met acquaintances and began to feel the thrill of London. Then, visiting his club, he found his letters and two telegrams: one forwarded from abroad, the other direct from Carshalton, but both with one command:

"Come home at once—Nana."

He was under promise, so home my lord went. Travelling by an afternoon train, he arrived at

Bedringham, four miles from Carshalton Court, in the early evening. He was not met, for he had not telegraphed his coming. The truth is that he felt his new rôle of husband and parent rather an absurd one and was in no mood to meet even the most respectful of servants. There was only a cab at the little inn, and Carshalton flatly refused to enter a four-wheeler.

"Come now, Jones, you must find me something. A dog-cart, eh?"

There was no dog-cart.

"What, not even a basket-chaise? What on earth do you drive the old ladies out in?"

The landlord grinned. There was no basket-chaise.

"Then a donkey-cart. I must go in a donkey-cart."

There was one near at hand; and in it Lord Carshalton set forth, his long legs dangling over the sides. He enjoyed it mightily, yet felt, with rue and plaint, that the careworn little ass he drove was slowly but surely dragging him back to parenthood and domesticity. For him, of all men, what a truly absurd situation! It pleased him to speak of it in enigma to the grinning boy at his side. Questioned afterwards as to my lord's conversation, the boy had given a flash of wide white teeth and had answered, "Put 'im down funny!"

Half-way to Carshalton a spanking horse in a

high dog-cart was pulled up short; and Carshalton, grinning up at his cousin and agent, said:

"Hello, Oxonford!"

George Oxonford was a big fair man of thirty-five. He had square shoulders and a square chin; and he sat squarely and faced the world in a thoroughgoing manner. He was so excellent an agent as to give his cousin easy excuse for absenteeism; and Carshalton had more than once said to him, "Virtue, old man, is a direct encouragement of vice."

Oxonford took his pipe from between his teeth now, and said:

"Get out of that Carshalton, there's room here."

"I'm all right, thanks," said Carshalton; "I'm fixed up awfully well."

"Don't be an ass," said Oxonford.

"Oh, not for worlds, my cousin," said the other pleasantly; and climbed into the cart.

As they spun along in the soft evening light they talked of anything but the one thing of which they thought. To right of them, to left, before them, behind them, almost as far as the eye could see, the country belonged to the one man, and was ruled by the kind, firm hand of the other: a goodly land of meadow and field and stream and woodland, its farms and clustering cottages embodying the romance of a late-lingering feudal peace. The April day was coming calmly to

its end; the wind had died away; the sunset was no tragedy of crimson and gold, but a faint warm opalescence of light caught in the prism of the mist; the birds seemed unable to stop singing. Carshalton sniffed white violets by the lodge gates; and again there welled up strong within him his one God-given human instinct—the love of race and home. He clutched Oxonford's arm at the last turn of the avenue and said under his breath:

“Is the heir here yet?”

“The doctors have been here long enough,” said the other man, and gave one glance up at the Georgian wing, where Lady Carshalton's rooms were. And he drove away in grim silence. He was the type of strong man that is vanquished by weakness; and the forlorn woman upstairs in her months of trouble had found a friend.

Carshalton, fretted by the eager silence of the place, skulked in the library, and told Hawkins, the butler, to bring him a whisky and soda.

“And, Hawkins, don't let those confounded doctors know I'm here, but tell Nana to come and speak to me.”

He drank his whisky and soda and waited, impatient as never before in all his careless life; and at last, opening the door to listen, he heard an infant's wailing cry. It tore at something within him, drawing him, yet ineffectually. A

deeper or a shallower man might have gone swiftly to gaze on that which he had called, creator-like, out of the Great Unknown. But Carshalton waited still, uneasy, hampered by the incidents of domesticity. And at last Nana entered the library, bearing a quaint small bundle of life, herself looking like a shrivelled little prophetess with eyes of flame. My lord did not like the look of her.

"Well," he said roughly, "which is it?"

"'T is a little bit of the world's sorrow," said she weirdly.

"A boy?" cried he, thinking the words gave her opinion of him.

"Your lordship's not so quick as might be," she answered; and added with some sternness, "This little scrap of life is a girl."

His face fell, yet he did not refuse to take the mite in his arms. Its helplessness was too strong for him: he was vanquished by that weightless burden. Strange, familiar words rang through his brain: "I have left undone those things which I ought to have done, and I have done those things which I ought not to have done." To cover his agitation he spoke lightly:

"You have let me down badly, Nana. Why did n't you order a boy? What's the good of a girl?"

"That's easy enough to answer," the woman said. "All the good in the world to my lady.

To a lonely woman there is no comforter like a girl baby."

All his jauntiness returned at this hint of preaching.

"True, O prophetess," he said. "Then the baby girl will do my duty for me. Good little baby! But, Nana," he added suddenly, "it's almighty small, isn't it? Too small to live, Nana. It'll never live."

And it did not. It was no smaller than other babies, and it was wanted—oh, so badly wanted!—by the poor lady upstairs; and yet it did not live. Its death was Lady Carshalton's opportunity, had she but known it. As Carshalton bent over the dead baby, wondering mightily how the little spirit had escaped and at the quick stealth of its going and at the lily purity of the tiny body left behind—so severe, so ageless, so solitary that he dared not even touch it—some dim comprehension of a woman's suffering came to him; and this, faint as it was, hurt his hitherto untroubled masculinity very badly. He went up-stairs to take his wife in his arms.

Lady Carshalton was nothing if not inopportune. He found her praying, not strenuously, but on her knees in her own vague ineffectual fashion: half dull resignation, half hopeless effort to appease whatever power sat above. She knew Carshalton was there, and yet she did not move or turn.

And he? A woman suffering with passion he could have raised and clasped with passion; yes, even at this late hour. But this dull figure, near neither to God nor to man, yet afraid of both—? He saw, but could not feel, the pathos of it. And he turned and left her.

CHAPTER II

WHO IS THE HEIR?

IN the autumn of the following year Lady Carshalton had twin boys. Lord Carshalton sighed with relief when he heard the news, and felt that his duty to his House was happily accomplished. But fate had not done with him yet.

No one knew exactly how it happened. The monthly nurse said that Nana mixed the twin boys, and Nana declared that the monthly nurse did it. The point is that it was done; and when Lord Carshalton asked, "Which is the heir?" two flushed and excited women called upon him to judge between them. When he was able to understand what all the fuss was about his action was characteristic. First he asked the nurse if either baby could give the other points; and when she replied that they were as like as two peas, he tossed for it.

"This is the winner," he said. "What's he screaming for, Nana? He's Mottisfont right enough. We'll call him Cedric. Tie a blue ribbon or some such bauble upon him and don't let me have any more of this tomfoolery."

But though Carshalton settled the difficulty in this offhand manner the nurse gathered that her future hung upon her silence as to the episode.

"A monthly nurse who mislays babies—" said his lordship, looking straight at her with his brilliant eyes and coming to a dramatic pause; and she knew that the jeer was a threat.

Nana, the faithful, he did not bind to silence. His wife, equally hampered by coward imagination and a conscience, there was no need to warn. She only sighed and talked much to Nana about it, fearing Fate—or God—more than ever; wondering always if the coin had fallen true. And so, for once, three women kept a secret. The doctor was not told. Carshalton, ingrate that he was, chose to regard doctors as purveyors of scandal and infection, indispensable only in confinement cases.

The twin boys flourished exceedingly. Nana made it her business to see that they never got mixed again. And as they grew out of the toddling stage, stammering and tottering their wonderful child way into coherent speech and action, she marked the great love between them, and her misgiving died away. Love was hardly the word: it was an unbroken unity. Together they had come forth from the Great Unknown, a dual manifestation of one creative impulse; alike in body, one in heart. What matter, then, that Cedric should be called Lord Mottisfont and

Ralph the younger son, since each lived in the soul of the other? Even Lady Carshalton's questionings sank into a feeble peace.

George Oxonford used to wonder how this poor neglected lady kept her hold on life at all. Watching her out of his stern, kind eyes, he marvelled to see that she did not age or fade. Some idea, great to her, some hidden hope, she must surely feed her soul upon. She walked aloof: forlorn, yet with a certain gentle dignity, which may only have sprung from the negative quality of her nature, but which, to a strong yet idealistic man, was supremely touching. And so George Oxonford, heart-proof against the wiles of girls, gave himself to serve this woman, who hardly realised his existence.

Nana, who served my lady too, knew all about it. Men could not lie to Nana; she would not let them.

"How much could you do for her?" she asked Oxonford abruptly one day. It was when the twins were quite small, and she was looking at him over a baby on each knee.

"For her? For whom?"

"Oh, you know; for my lady, of course."

"My good Nana, there's nothing I can do."

"There is, Mr. Oxonford. You could leave here, for instance."

"What?" he said, staring fiercely, but speaking whimsically. "Is thy servant a dog? I'm not

the villain of the piece. I do no harm here. I refuse to go."

"Pooh!" said Nana rudely. "You know what I mean well enough. As long as you manage things so well, so long will my lord stay away; so long will my lady be lonely, insulted. It is so insolent of him to stay away."

She gave the babies a vicious jog, which set them crying and her comforting them. Oxonford walked away and stared out of the window. Presently he came back and said:

"There's no happiness for her that way. You women may thank your stars that he gives you perhaps only one month out of the twelve. I know my cousin Carshalton. As long as he is strong enough to go the pace, he could not stay here. And when he can go it no longer, and you have him on your hands—well! Heaven help you, that is all!"

The Great Idea with which George Oxonford (idealising her) credited Lady Carshalton was really nothing but an absorbing blight. That dead baby girl, that dead hope, lay ever in her arms. What energy she had she spent in praying for another daughter, but the girl she prayed for did not come. When calamity came instead she blamed herself for those miscarried prayers of hers. Why not have entreated mercy on the little lives already given?

Lord Carshalton was, as usual, away when the

blow fell. He came home quite unexpectedly one day and captured little Ralph crossing the great hall.

"Stop, you little ruffian!" his lordship cried. "Don't you know I'm your father?"

The child struggled in his arms. Neither boy could endure even a momentary loss of freedom, or ever owned to any affection save for his soul-filling twin.

"I want to go to Cedric," he said.

"And where is Cedric, little fiend?"

"Up there with Nana," said the boy. "He's always up there now."

"What the deuce for?" asked Carshalton; but the child did not trouble to answer. He had broken away from his father, and his chubby legs were disappearing up the great staircase.

Lord Carshalton followed with a sinking at that gay heart of his. When he saw the wasted little face and the invalid couch and all the accursed extension apparatus, he swore like one of his own grooms. Old Nana stopped him sternly, but she need not have troubled. The child, Cedric, had turned to his brother. Ralph had something for him in his chubby little hand: a dead greenfinch; and in Ralph's heart was something which, it seemed, would never die: something to which Cedric could ever turn in forgetfulness of pain.

"How did it happen?" asked Carshalton, in very lurid language.

Nana drew him apart and told the tale. Cedric was riding the big rocking-horse when Ralph rolled a footstool across the room. There was a smashing fall, and little Cedric was picked up with a broken thigh. Unluckily the break was just above the knee joint, close to the "growing spot." The doctors had explained it all most learnedly; and the plain English of it was that the boy must be very badly lamed.

"And we tossed for it!" cried Carshalton. "We tossed for it!"

"You did, my lord," said Nana quickly, "and you 'll have to abide by it. The title and all that goes with it can't be taken away from my poor unlucky darling!"

"And the other darling—or devil—who did it with his own wicked little hand—what of him?" said Lord Carshalton ruefully; for this had hit him very hard.

"He does not know he did it," said Nana. "He must never know. A good lie comes as easy to me as eating, thank the Lord! And the rest of you can hold your tongues, I should hope."

"Oh, Nana, Nana!" said his lordship. "The lake of brimstone for all liars! Have you forgotten?"

The woman shook her head.

"If I must burn for it, well then, I must burn," said she. "It 's a real good lie."

Yes, Nana was right: the boys must never know. And the heir, spoilt for life, must remain the heir still. There was no way out of it.

CHAPTER III

"AS THE TWIG IS BENT"

HAND to hand, heart to heart, the twins went through boyhood: Ralph full of animal instincts as human boy could be; Cedric limping, but horribly clear-headed. They seemed to have no conscience and opposed a dual strength and ingenuity to all control. Love could not lead them: they knew no love but for one another; and to mention fear of God or man would have set them staring, as at a Dutchman speaking. Ambition? Cedric, intolerably haughty, thought it was enough that he was heir of Carshalton and Ralph the heir's twin soul. Their small pockets were always full of money—Carshalton was recklessly generous—and they spent it with insolent ease; and secured, in spite of tutors and governors growing grey with effort and bald with anxiety, much of the freedom they coveted. And they went to Eton as egregious a pair of young dunces as ever disgraced a preparatory school.

At Eton they found their level. Cedric decided that they would deign to "sap" a bit.

"But it does n't matter so much for you, Ralph," he said. "You can come out strong in the playing-fields. (How old Oxonford did rub those playing-fields in, to be sure! Good old prig!) But I 'm done for that way, you know. I 'll have to sap a bit, just to show these fellows what a Mandeville can do."

So he worked until he found he was likely to go up a division. Separation from Ralph was not to be borne. Cedric slacked off at once, did perfectly disgracefully in Trials, thereby gaining his own ends and a report over which his mother shed tears. His tactics grew more subtle; he did Ralph's written work for him, explained the cribs to him, prompted him, and kept his brother apparently level with himself. When necessary, he slacked off again; and so the twins rose in the school, slowly but together.

Then came the affair of Polly of Brown's Sock Shop. Polly was a pretty, silly girl. It was rumoured that her mother was bribed to remove her. She went to service. The twins vowed they would pay their tutor out for this. They arranged what they were pleased to call "a debauch"; and to this orgy they dared to invite their tutor in an anonymous note—"to meet Polly of Brown's Sock Shop."

Mr. Keynes read this note with wonder at the guilty hour of 10 P.M. At that very moment corks were flying upstairs; but the master smelt

a hoax and decided on a wise inaction. About eleven o'clock he opened his study door and saw what he took to be Polly coming mincing down the stairs,—Polly's pink frock and tinsel-braided cape, Polly's coquettish hat and yellow hair. He gasped; then grew dramatic and terrible. Then, just as the horrid word “suck” was breathed in his ear, another pink-frocked, hatted, yellow-haired vision appeared above, but this Polly was limping.

Inevitable punishment followed; and, in revenge, the twins ran away. Their pockets were full of money, so they headed away from home and had a ripping week, at the end of which they were caught in a Hampshire public-house, drinking lager beer (which they loathed) with a very fine swagger. It rather annoyed them that they were not sacked. Three months before this a boy had run away from the same house, so the affair was hushed up.

“Beastly cheek of Keynes to pretend he does n't mind! Of course he's in an awful rage really, but I suppose the governor smoothed his hair the right way. Good old governor!”

The twins were fifteen at the time; and so far as they were interested in any one they were interested in their father.

“I believe he's an awful rip, don't you?” said Ralph to Cedric, who replied, “You bet! But he's a decent sort: knows how to let a fellow alone.”

The "awful rip" happened to be at Carshalton Court when they went home for their summer holidays. He was growing a trifle world-weary, though he would not own it; and he had many queer sensations, the tale of which would have made a doctor look thoughtful,—little throbbings in his ears, little chills of the right hand and arm, shooting pains in his head; and sometimes he saw stars where stars there were none. He looked more than middle-aged.

"He's been going the pace," said one boy.

"You bet!" agreed the other.

The boys showed great talent in avoiding their parents, but were beautifully polite when escape was impossible. Carshalton was inclined to be pleased with them.

"Keynes made a lot of that little bolt of theirs," he said to Oxonford, "but I shall not be hard upon them. Boys will be boys. And their manners are good, Oxonford. No place like Eton for toning a fellow up!"

"They're cold-hearted young scamps, that's what they are," said the other man, tapping his boot with his riding-whip.

"Think so?" said Carshalton indifferently; and added, "They're jolly fond of each other, anyway. 'Devoted,' as our friend, Mrs. Manners, says. 'Oh, dear Lord Carshalton, how truly sweet it is to see how devoted your dear boys are

to each other!’ ” (He laughed rather cruelly.)
 “What fools women are!”

Oxonford ignored the great Woman question.

“I ’m fond of myself,” he said; “you ’re fond of yourself, Carshalton—mighty fond; but that ’s no virtue, is it? Comes too natural. And it ’s just in that way that those little rascals are fond of each other. It ’s not love really; it ’s a dual egoism. It ’s a blight, I take it, and if I were their father——”

Carshalton smiled his ready smile.

“And if you were their father? Go on, Oxonford.”

“I ’m thankful I ’m not,” said the other roughly.
 “On all counts, thank Heaven I ’m not!”

“On all counts?” asked Carshalton.

“On all counts, save one,” answered Oxonford, facing his cousin squarely. “I believe I could make a woman happy, if I put my mind to it.”

Lord Carshalton laughed again, quite pleasantly this time. He had known for years that Oxonford was Lady Carshalton’s faithful squire. The county had had time to suspect it, to gossip over it, to accept the position as final. Lady Carshalton herself had grown conscious of it; and the consciousness clothed her still with the semblance of youth. She was even gently arrogant to Oxonford at times: so sure was she of him, so safe in her own negative virtue.

“But I think you are wrong, you know,”

Carshalton went on. "Now the boys are fond of you, for instance."

"Not a bit of it. They like to swarm up into my dog-cart and drive round the farms and give themselves airs to the tenants. And they like to come fishing with me and use all my flies. And they'll come shooting with me because I can show 'em good sport and the rules of the game. Fond of me? They've no more affection than a well-conditioned tortoise and they're as cold-blooded as a mackerel."

He broke off, for Lady Carshalton had come out upon the terrace. Middle age was kinder to her than to many a livelier woman. She was comely still; and the slight vagueness of her movements was less noticeable now because more suited to her years. A most admirable maid—Jefferson by name—knew how to arrange the heavy, light-brown hair and how to dress her, not in the least like a tiresome fashion plate, but just like Cecilia, Countess of Carshalton. My lady walked with a slow grace and dropped into the chair which Oxonford gave her, folding her well-kept hands and smiling gently up at him.

"Were you talking of my boys?" she asked.

"Er—yes," answered Oxonford, wondering what she had heard.

"I'm afraid they worry you terribly," she said.

"Not at all," said he.

“A pleasure, I’m sure,” murmured Carshalton maliciously; and at that moment the twins hove in sight: Ralph full of health and life; Cedric limping very badly. Catching sight of the group on the terrace, they were about to make a bolt; but Carshalton called out, “Come here, you fellows!” and they had to come.

“Well, what devilry have you been up to now?” Lord Carshalton said.

“Nothing worse than usual, father,” Cedric replied promptly.

He spoke with a clear, half-insolent intonation, wrinkling up his forehead as if the cares of state were upon him. He was wondering by what stroke of diplomacy he could extricate Ralph and himself from this truly boring conclave.

“Sit down, dear boys,” said Lady Carshalton. “Get those chairs from the end of the terrace.”

“Thanks, mother,” said Cedric politely.

“I asked you what you had been doing,” Carshalton insisted, flicking a speck of dust from his knee.

“Fishing,” answered Ralph.

“With my flies, eh?” asked Oxonford. “Catch anything?”

“Rather!” said Cedric. “One or two little fellows and a fine two-pounder. You can have him for breakfast, Oxonford. We’ve left him with your old woman. But, by Jove, Ralph, where did we put that case of flies?”

"Don't know," said Ralph. "Down by the river, was it?"

"Jove! I believe it was. We'll have to go and fetch them. Awful bore! So sorry, Oxonford. But we'll find 'em all right. Don't you fret!"

And off they went shamelessly.

"This," said Lady Carshalton, rising in sudden anger, "is what it is to be a mother!"

Then she had heard, thought Oxonford. Her unaccustomed passion came as a shock to the two men, who thought they knew her so well. She walked away to the end of the terrace; and Carshalton watched her with some interest, until he saw her take out her handkerchief to wipe her eyes. It was Oxonford who went to her then. She was staring helplessly before her, the sunny August landscape swimming in the mist of her tears.

"Oh, be angry—keep on being angry! It would help you, would n't it?" he said, in deepened tones; and she turned and looked up at him with a childlike distress. He had the feeling that this was the first time he had really come into her line of vision. It was a moment of awakening, full of more pain, more joy than, after all these level years, he had hoped to know again.

"And he took her into his strong, capable arms," murmured the unabashed onlooker. "Cur-tain!" And, shrugging his shoulders, he produced

his match-box and began to light another cigarette.

But that cigarette was never lighted. Carshalton's right arm fell helpless; he saw sparks; and the world he had leaned upon gave way and left him tottering. He cried out to the Power that had stricken him; and it was a smothered, wordless cry.

The others ran to him; and almost before they reached him he could speak again. The whole thing was quickly over; yet for him also this was a day of awakening.

CHAPTER IV

"WHEN THE DEVIL WAS SICK!"

"WHEN that day comes, may Heaven help you, that 's all!" Oxonford had said to Nana; and now that day had come. The women had Carshalton on their hands: a changed irritable Carshalton, convinced of sin and developing a degenerate and worrying sense of religion.

For the first few months after that slight stroke Nana had flickering hopes of him; for he would return, at intervals, to his flesh-pots, leaving Carshalton Court in the peace which she had once so foolishly undervalued. But after a period of fitful phases, leading through melancholy, intermittent debauchery, gloom, suspicion, and gleams of the old reckless humour, he settled down finally to one eternal text, "The time is short." He grew shameless in preaching it, and became a weariness to his family and to himself.

Oxonford tried to shake him out of it.

"I used to tell you not to be an ass," he said roughly; "but really you were rather a nice kind of ass in your way. That 's your rôle, man.

Go back to it. As a Lutheran pastor you are a failure and, what is worse, a bore.”

Carshalton fixed upon his cousin those brilliant eyes which gave him the look of the complete fanatic now that his smile was gone, and replied:

“It is my duty to warn you of sin.”

“You are an embodied warning,” said Oxonford dryly. “Don’t bother to talk about it.”

“I’ll trouble you not to speak to me like that,” said his lordship haughtily. (He had begun to stand upon his dignity since his reformation.) “Need I remind you of the difference in our positions?”

“No, you need not,” replied Oxonford coolly. “I’m your paid dependant, eh? Is that the tone of it? All right then, I’m your paid dependant. But you can’t do without me, so really we’re just where we were before, old man.”

“You will find out your mistake,” said Carshalton darkly.

He crossed the room with a high-tragedy air, which sat very drolly upon him, rang the bell, and told the man-servant to send my lady to him.

“I’m off,” said Oxonford then, full of anger that she should be sent for like a servant.

“You will kindly stay,” said Carshalton. “What I have to say must be said to you as well as to her.”

Oxonford felt anger turn to rage within him. But she was in the doorway: mild, a little sur-

prised, a little frightened; and she crossed the room to him, as if near him were safety. Lord Carshalton had them at his mercy. He tore the veil from their eyes, suggesting the sin that he condemned. The woman paled, but was very still, wrapped in her negative purity and dignity; and when Oxonford, with bitter rage and pity in his heart, put out his right hand to her she laid her left in it and stood very close to him. For it had dawned upon her at last that he was suffering—suffering positively; and her innocence gave her the courage to show him pity too. For a full minute they stood thus; then Oxonford bent and kissed the slender, helpless hand very gently and gave it back to her. And Carshalton burst into sudden tears and cried:

“Oxonford, I’m a miserable chap! Forgive me, old fellow! Forgive me, George!”

And the next day he was back on his preaching again: “The time is short, the time is short.”

“I’m beginning to hope that it really may be,” said Oxonford to Nana.

The twins noted the queer change in their father with the merciless eye of boyhood. They were inclined to cultivate him now out of pure curiosity. When he lectured them on sin they listened quite politely; when he showed glimpses of his old dare-devil optimism even these unabashed scrutineers grew a shade sorry for him.

“A fellow never knows what he’ll come to!”

moralised Ralph at Christmas-time, inclining to the conclusion, "What 's the good of anything? Why, nothing!"

The boys had had very little Christmas fun; sin for every meal and "The time is short" in between; and the weather was sullen, the heavens weeping and weeping like a dreary woman, the short winter daylight hardly less heavy than the long hours of darkness.

"The whole horrid place reeks of the damp and the dismal," Ralph said. It was enough to turn a boy into a pessimist.

But Cedric brushed aside futilities with the practical question, "What 's the next move in the precious game?" He pumped Nana; he pumped Oxonford; he pumped the villagers—great on the subject of strokes; he pumped the Bedringham doctor (this with skill), and finally said to Ralph:

"The poor old governor 's a gone-er. Sooner or later he 'll have another of these strokes, and we 'll be at the head of things before we know it. We 'll have to play up a bit. Awful bore, but so it is!"

They did "play up." Their tutors and governors regarded the change as a miracle; not lightly to be accepted as genuine. But the wonder kept on working; and the boys left Eton at eighteen with a very fair record and without having made a friend. Ralph was a handsome, well-grown

young animal; and Cedric, whose bodily development had been so cruelly hindered, was a small, intellectual edition of him, civilised to the point of brutality. They were Nana's darlings still, but the old woman knew well enough that "darling" meant full as much sorrow as joy. She looked at them over her spectacles and said to Cedric:

"Now, my lord, what are you going to do?"

"We ought to go to a coach for a year," the boy answered, "and then to Cambridge."

Nana nodded and said:

"If you want one thing you'd best pretend you want another. My lord's that perverse now that if you serve him beef he always asks for mutton, and if you want him to put on his boots you have to hand him his hat. A little while ago he gave warning to every servant on the place down to Hawkins"—the butler—"who has been here twenty years, and my lady's maid, who is a jewel, if ever there was one. And they'd all have gone, too, but for Mr. Oxonford. He is a friend, he is, for a woman to have!"

"Did the governor dismiss you, Nana?" Cedric asked.

"He did, but I says to him, 'My lord, you and I understand each other. I take your notice quite friendly, my lord, and I give you notice in return that I'm staying on with my lady, and I hope you'll take that in the same friendly spirit.' And he burst out laughing and chaffing

quite like old times. I used to think he was the devil himself, and so he was: the devil in a good humour, easy enough to get on with. But since piety's entered into him there's no word to describe him. Ay, but women have a deal to bear!”

“Confound it!” said Ralph. “I mentioned our plans to him last night. It will be a nuisance if he cuts up rough.”

“He won't,” said Cedric; “and, if he does, we'll set Oxonford upon him.”

But Lord Carshalton did cut up rough; and it was useless to set Oxonford upon him, because of Oxonford's own careless words. “It is a dual egoism; a blight,” Oxonford had said. Lord Carshalton had had time to evolve from this text a very fine sermon, which he preached to the twins with gusto. They listened with some appreciation until they saw that he really was “cutting up rough.” From an orgy of words and images his meaning emerged clear as a cameo: the boys were to be sent to different coaches for a year; then one would go to Oxford and the other to Cambridge.

“And you can toss for that, if you like,” said his lordship, with a grim laugh.

Cedric would have agreed, remembering the boots and the hat, but Ralph spoilt diplomacy by vowing that no power in earth, heaven, or hell should separate him from his brother. This was

quite enough for Carshalton, once the careless, now the cussed. War was declared. There were constant skirmishes: wordy battles, in which Carshalton usually got the worst of it, by reason of Cedric's cool brutality. Dislike of his heir grew within him. Oxonford mastered him, Nana defied him; but not like this. Both retained some regard for him; and the man in his ruined mental state felt it. But this boy of his—this spoilt, lamed heir, in whose clear, scrutinising eyes he was allowed to see what a wreck of a father he was—. Carshalton, impotent as an angry woman, wept over it in private: yes, wept; holding that poor, throbbing head of his and calling out his woes, and hearing neither voice nor answer.

In public he kept a stern face and wrote endless letters to coaches, promising them his boys; and always the boys refused to go. Nana reasoned, Lady Carshalton shed tears in vain. Oxonford, recognising an *impasse*, contented himself with trying to keep the boys out of mischief through a wasted autumn and winter.

Early April that year was as chilly as winter; but one day out burst the great, bright sun, and flowers and meadows and budding hedgerows threw him back a delicate glory of living colour; and for him the forest trees murmured low and the birds sang riotously and insects hummed the overture to their great summer chorus; and the

voices of all living things were in the resonant spring air. It was like a sudden resurrection.

Carshalton forgot his gloom awhile and wandered all the bright morning through copse and field and water meadow, with an almost childlike delight in all this beauty of which he was the overlord. And as he re-entered the park by the western lodge gates there came to him the scent of white violets, and with it an overpowering memory. Once again he seemed to drive up the avenue, asking Oxonford fearfully, “Is the heir here yet?” And once again he seemed to hold in his arms that dead flower of a baby. It was more than gloom that rushed back upon him; it was misery. That baby girl might have been so sweet a child, so kind a daughter to him.

His body was too weary to aid his tormented mind, and the sight of Ralph at that unlucky moment was a crowning irritation. He called the boy to him, determining, in this sudden heat of woe, to settle the absurd question of the boys’ future then and there. Ralph followed his father into the library and listened with rather too obvious politeness to a harangue in which he was by this time word-perfect.

“Your brother defies me,” said Carshalton at last. “An impudent, cold-blooded young dog! But I mean to have my way about this. I’m the Head of the House: I’m not dead yet, you know.” (He was waxing very warm.)

"No, sir," answered Ralph imperturbably.

"No, I 'm not dead yet, and I mean to have my way. I have made arrangements—definite arrangements—for you at the beginning of May——"

He broke off, for Ralph was smiling. Those definite arrangements were an old story now. The boy's smile maddened Carshalton.

"By heavens!" he stammered, in a fury: "I 'll—I 'll—" He put his hand to his head, then went on in fluent anger. "You're led by the nose by that precious brother of yours. He has fooled you all round. Do you know—no, of course you don't, but I 'll tell you—that he has no certain title for all his haughty airs? He is no more the heir than you, so you need n't sit so low to him. The women mixed you up; and we tossed for it. He won the toss, but I 'll swear"—his face darkened—"that coin never fell true. Look at his lameness. A crippled Earl of Carshalton? Who ever heard of such a thing? Ask your mother if she thinks that coin fell true! Ask Nana, ask Oxonford! No, he does n't know, confound him!—but he may for all I care!"

"So you tossed for it, did you?" cried Ralph. "That was your idea, I 'll bet. My only hat! What a rum go! What real ripping fun!"

His handsome face was eager with interest; he looked at his father almost with affection:

such charm was in the doings of “the awful rip.” But Carshalton misunderstood him.

“Cedric won’t think it such fine fun,” he said grimly. “But lawyers, my boy, are cautious fools, and——”

“Cedric?” said Ralph, interrupting coldly. “Why, the toss was fair enough. I shall not think of telling Cedric.”

“You young fool,” screamed Carshalton, taken by ungovernable fury. “You confounded young fool!”

He put his hand to his head with an awful cry. Again the world fell from him; and this time it was not merely the affair of a minute. His right side was paralysed. For ten hours he remained unconscious. Understanding, then, for his torment, returned to him; but the brain could no longer dictate any speech but one. All his stammering answer to those who bent over him in pity or in question was, “You fool! You confounded young fool!”

CHAPTER V

VERA

TWO great doctors came the next day and looked at Carshalton as he lay helpless. They shook their heads, described his inabilities in Latin words, which Nana asked the local doctor to put down on paper, Lady Carshalton being quite distracted. And they said that the patient might speak with some degree of coherence again, and he might not; he might, in some degree, recover the use of his paralysed limbs, and he might not: one must hope for the best. He must be well waited on, of course:—they would send down a reliable nurse; but nature, in these sad cases, was the best restorer. Questioned as to the future of Lord Carshalton's intellect, they predicted that, at the best, he would be mentally lamed; and, seeing the distressed look of Nana, who had had enough of mental lameness to last her through a Methuselah's lifetime, they repeated quite kindly that one must hope for the best. Then, decorously solemn, they entered the carriage with George Oxonford and were driven away.

Nana caught Oxonford on his return and asked, "Did they say anything different to you, sir?"

Nothing different: that was all their science.

"We are in the hands of the Lord," said old Nana solemnly; and drew out the scrap of paper with the learned writing on it and put on her spectacles to peer at it.

"Hemiplegia, aphasia, agraphia," read she very quaintly. "That 's some of his diseases. They seem to me for all the world like the new-fangled names the gardeners get for shrubs; but I suppose it 's all right."

"Yes, it 's right enough," Oxonford said, looking kindly down at her little wrinkled visage.

"It 's right enough, Nana. How is my lady?"

"Distraught, poor soul!" said the old servant.

"Kind o' quiet and wild together. I 'm fearing for my lady. Women are like that when even the worst of husbands is laid low. Will you go to her, Mr. Oxonford, sir? It might do her good."

He found her in one of the smaller drawing-rooms, a dainty, early Victorian room, all rose-wood and chintz and old china. She was seated sideways on the broad, low window-seat, her beruffled hands (her maid was great on ruffles) clasped on her lap, her frightened eyes fixed on the far horizon, as if she dared not even look at those broad lands around the Court for which she had sold her soul. Something was in her face which Oxonford, who had loved her for her

helplessness, had never dreamed of seeing; for the deepest-natured man may be brought to marvel at the shallowest woman in her moments of stress.

He sat down facing her and took those folded hands into his strong grasp, and said, "Now tell me all about it."

"Oh," she said very low, "is n't the place terribly quiet?"

It was terribly quiet. The servants crept about, doing their duties by stealth; their whispering sounding small and ghostly in the vast, hushed spaces of hall and gallery and corridor. Not a sound rose above that muted awe, save once when a door banged, like a violent insult. Outside, the busy rooks were cawing and wheeling round their nests in the avenue, and a dog was barking in the stable yard. All sharp morning sounds were in the spring air, so that the still house seemed a spot of living death in the pulsing heart of life.

"We are under ban of God," said Lady Carshalton, this time in a whisper.

Oxonford could not speak; he held her hands the more strongly.

"I never loved him," she said aloud then, meeting his compelling eyes. "Never. It is all very terrible."

"Tell me all you feel," said Oxonford. "Trust me and tell me all."

"I sold my woman's nature," she replied, "and I have been punished. My little baby, my little girl, died. She would have saved me. Oh, Oxonford, how I prayed for another girl! How I long for a daughter!"

The man made a movement to loose her hands, but was stopped by her pure, hurt eyes.

"I am afraid for my boys," she said. "I think I love them, but I know they do not love me. They are their father's sons and mine—and mine, Oxonford. You know how weak I am."

"I will help you," he answered. "I swear to God that I will give every thought to helping you."

"This awful thing has hurt me here," she said, drawing one hand away and laying it on her heart. "I never loved him, but he is my husband. You cannot know how that feels to a woman. And he is punished so bitterly, while I go almost free."

"You have not sinned," declared Oxonford stoutly; but she shook her head and looked away.

"He lies up there so awfully still," she went on. "And when he speaks it is to convict the world of folly. And his eyes, Oxonford! They have a fearful intelligence in them. That is the most terrible of all: his brain shut up there, a prisoner, an agonising prisoner, in his living body of death. I dare not speak to him again. If I tell him I am

bitterly sorry, he will answer, 'You fool!' And unless he recovers that will be all his speech until death. The doctors told Nana so. He has not been a wise man, yet his summing up of life is Solomon's own: *All is vanity*. A world of fools! A world of fools!"

Her eyes filled; Oxonford was thankful to see it. This interview, so hard to him, had brought her help. He drew her to her feet, asked where she kept her handkerchief, and wiped her eyes with such gentle care that she smiled wistfully up at him and said:

"You treat me like a child."

"I do," he replied. "It is good for you. The nicest women are like children. Now put on your hat and come out into the air, and we will talk things over."

In the sunk Italian garden—for there Lady Carshalton chose to walk—was an old-world peace. As they went down the moss-grown steps the modern atmosphere of strife fell away from them. To tread those formal alleys was to rest from the devious ways of the world. The quaint beasts and birds in clipped yew stood in an unvarying fortitude of shape; the fountain sent up ever the same moderate brightness; and just now the old rookery walls were in wealth of purple aubretia and golden alyssum and blue forget-me-not, giving a daring touch of colour to the trim, quiet place.

"I love to come here and think that there was a time when paths were not tangled," said Lady Carshalton; and Oxonford made incoherent answer of the crooked being made straight.

Lady Carshalton returned to the still house comforted even as a child is comforted. And Oxonford, going to the stables for his horse, caught one of the grooms kissing an under-housemaid behind the door. The girl scuttered away; the man looked guilty; but Oxonford, as he threw himself into the saddle, felt, somehow, lighter-hearted. That kiss, that thing of nature, one with the spring call of the birds, seemed to break the spell of gloom. The whole world was not yet caught in the Carshalton net of fate.

The boys, Cedric and Ralph, were awed now into some show of sorrow for their father, affection for their distressed mother. Cedric limped softly into Carshalton's room one day when the nurse was out walking, and the invalid gazed at him with a stony indifference. But when Ralph presented himself Carshalton's irritation was pitiful to see. He sputtered and choked over the one phrase which his injured brain permitted him, bringing it out at the last with a fearful distinctness. His left-handed gestures called on whatever gods might be for yet more blasting powers of speech. The nurse, returning hurriedly, was aghast. Ralph, questioned by Oxonford, by

the doctor, by Nana, by Lady Carshalton, by Cedric, would not give up his key of knowledge. He adhered to his first tale.

"The governor was just rowing me because I would not say I would go to old Hills without Cedric. He got jolly mad, you know, and fell down. Why make me repeat the story? It makes me sick to think of it."

In fact the boy looked miserable enough. He was forbidden to go to his father again; and indeed he had no wish to repeat the visit. But Cedric went often, when the nurse's back was turned. He had got hold of a medical book and was reading up cases of aphasia. It interested him to make simple experiments on Carshalton's blighted intelligence; and he assured Ralph that it interested Carshalton too, for it must be so dull for the poor chap lying up there with no amusement.

"He's really quite intelligent," Cedric said. "He knows the use of things. When I gave him a glass and said, 'What's this?' he lifted it to his lips with his left hand and looked ever so knowing. Would have liked a 'B. and S.' in it, no doubt. Of course I don't worry him. I only tell him pleasant things; spicy bits of news and scandal that I know he would like; for somehow I think that rotten religious craze is gone away from him. I read him a hymn yesterday and I'm sure he did not like it. It's a rum world.

Poor old governor! He will never bully-rag us again."

George Oxonford took the first opportunity of speaking to the twins rather in the heavy-father style; but Cedric cut the ground from under his feet. The boys had put their heads together and had decided that as the poor old governor was laid low by Act of God they would do as he had wished. So the "definite arrangement" held good after all; and in early May, when the awed hush in the great house had settled down into a vague peace, Ralph went to the Rev. Horace Hills at Littlebury; and Cedric to Oxfordshire to Arthur Bernard Droylsden, a very successful university coach. Ralph was as white as a woman when they parted, and Cedric's black brows were drawn into a single angry line of pain.

"I hope he understands what we are doing for his sake," said Ralph.

"Oh, yes," said Cedric. "Of course he only said the usual thing, but the very fact of his trying to speak shows he understands. The nurse said it was so. She is n't a bad sort, that nurse; and how she lifts him! She is as strong as a crate. Well good-bye, old man, and good luck!"

"So long!" said Ralph.

This was at Paddington. Their trains ran parallel for a few seconds, then Cedric's forged

ahead; and Ralph, who had been faithfully waving, threw himself back in his first-class carriage and stared at the opposite wall. There was a lump in his throat, highly discreditable to his nearly nineteen years. He swore under his breath to pull himself round; and had quite an easy swagger when he arrived at Littlebury.

The Rev. Horace Hills had a poor living, a rambling vicarage, a wife and two daughters, besides two sons at Cambridge. He had been a Senior Wrangler in his day, and had thought to do great things in life; but he was without influence or personal magnetism, and promotion never came. The Church dumps her bores with an admirable calmness. Mr. Hills's pupils paid him well; and, in his rigid, solemn way, he did his best for them.

"There are three other pups here," Ralph wrote to Cedric; "not bad sort of fellows—especially Jameson—but not quite our sort, you know. Not that it matters. The old man is a horrid bore in the church and out; but of course they can't get rid of him. 'Why not try faith?' Jameson said to one of the farmers. 'Faith removes mountains, so why not Hills?' Jameson thinks he is a wag; and old Barnes (that's the farmer) thinks so too. Barnes lets us go fishing in his part of the river. We give old Hills the slip. There'll be a wild row some day. My brain is awfully slack without you, old fellow.

Can't get to work anyhow. Mrs. Hills pets me a lot. It's rather sickening. There's two Hills girls. They think themselves pretty, and perhaps they are; but just set them beside Evelyn Manners, for instance, and you would see the difference jolly quick. By the way, mother writes that Mrs. Manners is awfully good to her now that the governor's downed. I don't trust that Manners woman. Mother is too jolly soft to see through her, but old Oxonford will look after things all right. Are you sapping? I suppose I ought to, but Lord! I can't. So long, old boy! "*P.S.* I'm collecting moths. It is rare fun netting them at night, because we are not allowed out after nine. Such rot! Prissy Hills sets them up for me, because it is such a beastly fag."

Ralph was not getting much good at Littlebury. He was the patrician among plebeians; and he knew it. Mr. Hills might nag laboriously, but every one else bowed down to the spoilt, handsome boy; and the general homage made him heady. He missed the prop of Cedric's stronger intellectuality, and was in danger of going to pieces. The farmers said he was a real young rip, while poor Prissy Hills, to whom he made insolent love, shed many a tear on his account. She was a simple-hearted little thing, for all her airs and graces, and her life was so starved and limited down there in Littlebury, high romance ever

escaping her. But she knew she had no real hold over Ralph Mandeville. Finally, on the very edge of a disgraceful entanglement, Ralph felt a pull at his heart-strings, a call of the blood. To Cedric! To Cedric!

He planned a bolt with such care and craft that he really seemed to have disappeared into space. There was consternation in Littlebury Vicarage and woe in one poor little heart.

Prissy Hills had had a merciful escape, poor child; but for the moment she only knew that romance had fled from her. She lay on her bed face downwards and wept in secret; then arose with a little hardening of her pretty mouth and the first bloom of her youth gone.

Meanwhile the truant fetched a cunning circuit and, in due course, reached his destination. Besides the usual trappings of the flesh, he wore a ridiculous false moustache and a pair of eyeglasses; and he was enjoying himself hugely. He asked where Mr. Droylsden lived, and came presently to an old red-brick house shadowed by a great cedar and set deep in a shady garden.

It was Saturday afternoon and the weather of a glaring heat. Under a walnut tree was slung a hammock, and, curled up in it, was a lissom youth, who seemed to have found a royal road to learning; for he had a book in his limp and lazy hand, and his cap was well pulled down over his eyes. For a moment Ralph thought

that it was Cedric. He charged across the lawn and pulled up short at the hammock. The dreaming student pushed his cap up a little, discovering one eye, which he cocked with some impertinence at Ralph.

"Where 's Mottisfont?" asked Ralph abruptly.

"Do you want him?"

"Have n't I just asked for him?"

"Are you the Great Panjandrum?" inquired the youth, sitting up in the hammock with an air of vast interest. "We have been rather expecting his arrival. Yes, I see you are. Really, this honour——"

"Rot!" said Ralph. "I 'm Mottisfont's cousin, Merton Lister. Where is he?"

"Oh!" groaned the youth, relapsing under his cap. "Not the Panjandrum after all!"

Finally he deigned to say that Cedric was to be found in the punt on the river.

"Go to the bottom of the garden, O most noble, and you will see the river. Turn to the left, follow the stream, and you will see Mottisfont. You will probably also see——"

He paused dramatically.

"What?" asked Ralph.

"In the afternoon they came unto a land where it was always afternoon," murmured the youth, as if in his sleep.

Down the slope of the garden went Ralph, through a royal brilliance of colour, to the shade

that was by the murmuring river. Some former wealthy owner of the place had caught the stream in its passing to beautify his loved garden. There were little wooden bridges, crossing to tiny islands with alder trees and shady seats; and in the shallow by-channels were tinkling crystal falls; and in deep pools were virgin white water-lilies, wide-awake in the flare of the summer afternoon but closing to sleep at sundown, when the fairies ventured to float upon the broad green leaves. On the garden side of the stream were bowers and showers of red roses in full bloom; and on the shady side across the bridge was a walk for lovers. This walk Ralph followed; and, leaping the fence at the end of the garden, tracked the freed stream through the summer meadows. Where it spread in a yielding soil were wide margins of rushes, haunt of quaint birds and insects; where it narrowed again its banks were thick with meadow-sweet and purple loosestrife—a riot of scent and colour; and on either side of this rippling, rushing thread of life were acres of June grass, ripe for the mower, rich-toned with red of sorrel seed and the tarnished gold of dying buttercups.

At a sudden turn in the river, where willow trees bent over the bright mirror of the water, a living picture started out of this background of still life. A girl was standing in a punt near the willows, grasping the punt pole and turning the slow craft with strong, indifferent ease. The girl

was tall and massive. She wore a short serge skirt; a collarless blue sailor blouse, strapped round her firm waist with a leathern belt; very workman-like shoes, and a boy's sailor hat, most rakishly tilted backward. With feet wide-planted she stood, smoking a cigarette, which she held and turned with her lips in easy masculine fashion. The tilted hat showed her hair (bright auburn, with a strong kink in it), parted in the middle and twisted carelessly above the nape of her full neck; and this simple hair-dressing accorded well with the classic style of her features, which were peculiarly straight and delicate, though set in too strong a mould of flesh. Delicate, too, was her skin; fine, even-toned, unflushed as a baby's; nowhere deeper in tone than the palest of dog-roses. Her eyes were as nearly green as human eyes could be; full-lidded, and gaining an added touch of the daring, the bizarre, from the thick, bright auburn lashes and the vividly pencilled, narrow line of the auburn eyebrows. The full eyelids would drop now and again as she glanced at a lazy figure among the stern cushions or at the terrier that yapped and pranced at her feet; and then the green eyes would widen again in bright indifference. All the noises in Noah's ark would have left this young woman's nerves unshaken.

Her cigarette, her attitude, her strong development struck Ralph full in the eyes. Erratic son of an erratic father, he was yet not brainy

enough to see beyond the conventional, or to pardon any but his own eccentricities.

"What a brute of a girl!" he thought. "What a real brute of a girl!"

And then she spoke. Her voice was of the full, muffled order, and she spoke through the cigarette, with more than a suggestion of boyish side.

"What real rot having to go home to tea! But Bruin is in an awful rage to-day. Best not make him too mad! Drag that cushion aboard, Cedric. It's trailing in the water."

Yes, the young fellow curled up on the cushions at her feet was Cedric. As the punt swung slowly round, Ralph saw his brother's face looking up at the girl. He had never seen that look before, but, instinct-taught, he turned sick with jealousy. The girl espied him then.

"What's this fair little sight?" she asked: and knew who it was before the words were out of her mouth. With that whitening face, that scowl of pain, Ralph was strangely like his brother, in spite of his absurd little disguises. Cedric turned on his elbow and looked at his twin. The futile moustache was no excuse for the moment's bored hesitation. Then he spoke easily.

"Why, it's Ralph, by all that's wonderful. Pull in to shore, Vera. Ralph, old man, what price that moustache of yours?"

Their hands met, but not their hearts. Ralph knew that he was first no longer.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

MORE painful than the sudden loss of love is the ghastly, thin semblance of it which mortals assume to cover the indecency of its falling away. Not so the immortal gods; who loved, forsook, and went their way in a bright, strong shamelessness.

Cedric drew his brows together at the story of Ralph's bolt from Littlebury. Impossible to turn prig and preacher, but the fact remained that Ralph's presence was inconvenient. The fact also remained that once this reunion would have meant delight. So he said carelessly:

"Shall you put up in the village a day or two, old man?"

Ralph replied that he would put up at The Hare and Hounds. There would be no hue-and-cry for a day or two: he had put old Hills off the scent. So Cedric went with him to engage a room; and also dutifully introduced Ralph to Mr. Droylsden as his cousin, Merton Lister. Mr. Droylsden, who was also "Bruin" and Vera's

father, drew his shaggy eyebrows together and glared at the young fellow so fiercely through his thick spectacles that Ralph felt the horrid insincerity of his false moustache. His relief verged on humiliation when Mr. Droylsden relaxed into a smile of great sweetness and said:

"We can put you up for a day or two, Mr. Lister. I have only to tell my daughter."

"It's awfully good of you," said Ralph. "I'm staying at The Hare and Hounds. But I'll look in now and again, if I may."

"Any time," Mr. Droylsden said. "Our hours are irregular, but there is some work done here, though you may not think so. Show your cousin round the place, Mottisfont, so that he may feel at home."

He nodded kindly to the boys; and before they were out of the study had forgotten them and was deep in his manuscripts.

"He's writing a book on the 'Psychology of the Modern,'" said Cedric. "Says it's going to open the eyes of the blind. He's a great philosopher."

"I thought he was a coach," said Ralph dryly.

"So he is," cut in Cedric. "He's got a wonderful knack of getting work out of fellows. He trusts them and he's magnetic. He expects a certain amount of reading done; and every now and then he wakes up out of his dream and in a few hours lets more light in upon you than an

ordinary man would in a year. He's an extraordinary chap, is Bruin. Look at his record of passes!"

"Seems a mild old boy enough," said Ralph.

"Bruin does n't waste his energy," replied Cedric. "He could no more nag than he could do crochet. But he can let out when the fit takes him. No one can manage him then but Vera."

A silence fell on mention of the name, which had been looming large through all this manufactured talk.

"Where is Mrs. Droylsden?" asked Ralph then.

"In paradise, we hope," Cedric answered, with his flippant coolness. "Vera runs the commissariat: has done it since she was fifteen. She's nineteen now. There's no fuss, but it all seems to run smooth enough; and if by chance there's a hitch, it is n't Vera who is going to fret."

"She ought to have a chaperon," said Ralph abruptly.

"Think so? Bruin does n't even seem to know that she's grown up."

"He'll find out some day."

"Yes, and pretty soon," said Cedric. "A man ought to take his degree, though, first."

Very opportunely the youth of the hammock came sauntering up the garden. He was the

Honourable Alfred Seaton; and to him Ralph was presented as "My cousin, Merton Lister." Seaton cocked an eye at him.

"The name will serve," he remarked stagily. "'T is a good name."

Then he said one or two mighty civil things to Mr. Merton Lister and passed on, treading delicately.

"That rotter twigs," said Ralph. "What does he mince along like that for? Does he think he is King Agag?"

"Oh, he's all right," replied Cedric carelessly.

"Is this a menagerie or a lunatic asylum?" suggested Ralph.

Cedric did not trouble to reply, but the shrug of his shoulders seemed the retort obvious.

From this time the more Cedric tried to hide his boredom the more apparent it became to Ralph, who yet could not tear himself away. He stayed on at The Hare and Hounds, spending much time at the Cedar House. Obstinacy held him, and hate of Vera, whom he watched malignly; and stricken love held him: the love that turns again and again to the hand that had wounded it in hope of balm, where balm there is not. The boy suffered cruelly: the more so that Cedric, though very pale and wan, seemed intolerably well poised, finding love a spur to intellect and life too good a thing to be greatly marred even by the faint annoyance of his brother's presence.

That was what love could come to, mused Ralph: a faint boredom—no more than that. And when two or three days—a monotony of rainless heat—had passed away, he grew very bitter; for the more he saw of Vera Droylsden, the more hopeless seemed his case.

At first, hurt though he was, he had been able to brush away the thought of her with contempt. She was "a real shocker." Sooner or later Cedric, the fastidious, would see this; and then her day would be over. Cedric was under illusion: the weakness of the cripple glorifying vulgar strength. But as Ralph watched the girl he grew more and more afraid of her; and hatred deepened. There was real strength in her: real masculine strength. Many a woman tries to shake off the bond of sex by assuming an uneasy masculinity, but Vera Droylsden was quite thoroughgoing: there was no pose about her. When Ralph handed her his cigarette case, smiling satirically and saying, "They're Egypts: a good brand. As a smoker you will know," she replied quite frankly, "No, thanks. I've got a cheap little brand of my own, which suits me down to the ground. I don't go by names. I smoke what I like." That was the first time Ralph felt any fear of her.

He noticed, too, that although the girl disliked feminine duties, she got through the necessary housekeeping successfully, triumphantly even.

It had to be done, so it was done, and with all speed. Vera Droylsden might blunder, but would never hesitate.

"May I be allowed to lay a suggestion before the Commissariat Department?" asked Alfred Seaton one day.

"Let's have it," said Vera, lying back in the hammock and puffing out smoke.

"Little Alfred is a *gourmet*," went on Seaton. "He likes a little dish of sheep's-heads and brain sauce. Are there any sheep's-heads in this village?"

"What do you think, dear boy?" inquired the Head of the Commissariat. "Ever look in the glass? About brains I'm not so sure."

"That's all right," said Seaton. "Sheep go in flocks. Where there's one, there's more. Then it's settled about that little dish?"

"Right-O," said Miss Droylsden.

She saw Ralph sneering, and took no manner of notice, but lay very still, looking up at the sky so blue between the fragrant walnut leaves with the meditative expression of an odd, fat baby. Her terrier, Jack, was dozing across her feet; and the boys were lying and squatting on the grass around her.

There was Carstairs, son of a cabinet minister: a weedy, overgrown youth, who looked starved and rather dull, but had an enormous appetite and a misguided sense of humour. There was

Sedgewick: blue-eyed, thickset, vigorous; who was always doing dumb-bell exercise and bathing in the river, and had a lingering passion for birds'-nesting and ratting and rabbit-snaring. And there was La Bercée, a French youth: with hair *à la brosse* and very white teeth and queer, line-y, over-jaunty clothes. He had come to learn English, and was learning it very fast—vigorous, Vera-like English, droll from a Gallic tongue. And then there was Alfred Seaton, who posed as *gourmet* and indolent cynic, and who was really the most brilliant and industrious of the lot. With them all Vera was hail-fellow-well-met: on terms of absolute comfort and equality and loyalty. They called her "Vera of the Strong Heart." Ralph hated and feared her more and more.

And how had this girl—so careless of sex—got hold of Cedric, the cold, the keen, the isolated? Ralph, with all his inborn, intimate knowledge of his twin sharpened by pain to a morbid keenness, answered that question also to his own greater misery. Vera did not seem one whit sorry for Cedric; the queer greenish eyes never softened as they looked at her lame boy-lover. Cedric, bereft of his twin, had loved her for her divine want of compassion.

"She's a real shocker!" said poor Ralph to himself, raging, "and a cold-hearted young devil of a fool girl too."

And old Hills or Oxonford would soon be upon him. They would track him to Cedric in the end. What a world! Oh, what a truly rotten world it was!

CHAPTER VII

"TO BE MY WIFE"

IF Arthur Bernard Droylsden had been a rich man, he would have spent his life in the British Museum, mining for quaint knowledge. As it was, he fled thither occasionally by fast train, spent a breathless day in the taking of copious illegible notes, and returned at night in an unwashed state of exhilaration, starvation, exhaustion, and compunction.

"Then is our Bruin a real bear," said Vera. "Then must we approach him softly, bearing buns."

On Wednesday morning Ralph strolled into the garden of the Cedar House and found Vera and two of the boys packing hampers on the lawn.

"What 's up?" he asked.

"Bruin 's gone off sudden, like a pistol shot," explained Vera, "so we 're off too. Picnic at Kersley Lock. Jolly little spot! Good bathing up that way. You come too? Make yourself useful then. Just hand me those bottles of ginger fizz. Confound you, Jack, you horrid

little tike! Kick him, La Bercée! He's licking the butter."

It was Ralph who kicked the small black mongrel. He felt in the mood for it. Vera's eyes narrowed a little. She said nothing, but held out her hand to Jack, who thrust his black-and-tan muzzle into it and rolled apprehensive eyes around. Not one of the boys would have hurt her dog: they knew her language and her heart. La Bercée looked aggressively at Ralph, then stuck out his foot and murmured:

"I also shall try ze toe of ze boot! *Hein, Véra?*"

"Don't be a fool," said Vera shortly.

"Zese tennis shoe is not vare strong," said La Bercée then. "Made in Chermanie! But tomorrow I shall wear ze good French boot. Zen we shall see! *Hein*, little dog, shall we not see?"

Ralph stuck his hands in his pockets and stared over La Bercée's head. Far be it from him to notice a Frenchy's threats!

Alfred Seaton was whistling and staring with a singular insolence. If only the fellow would say something, thought Ralph: one might punch an Englishman's head with honour. But Seaton whistled and stared. Cedric and the other boys were down by the river, launching the boat.

"Little Alfred, La Bercée, ye are idle," struck in Vera. "Buck up and strap this hamper.

Now then, Ralph, if you 're coming, cart something down to the boat. We 're just off!"

Ralph's disguise had worn very thin in these few days. Every one but Bruin knew who he was; yet the pups still called him "Lister." "It makes things easier to pretend he's Mottisfont's cousin," said Alfred Seaton, "for the chap wants a lot of fighting off." They disliked him for his insolence to Vera. Ralph knew it well enough. Vera herself was kind to him and the unhappy boy hated her the more. Such beastly cheek in her to pity him! Vera alone had invited him to this picnic. Loathing himself for going, he could not make up his mind to stay away. Her food would choke him; he had not once taken a meal at the Cedar House; yet go he must. Cedric drew him still by chains that cut. Chains of love or hatred, Ralph hardly knew; but they bound him fast.

Vera's voice broke through the clash of his thought.

"Now then, Ralph, are you going to scull? I'll take a pair of 'em. Cedric will cog the boat, Seaton will tinkle the banjo, and the others will sit low and obey orders. Are the bathing two's in, and Bruin's pink pyjamas?"

"What on earth are they for?" asked Ralph.

"My bathing costume," said Vera; "and a ripping one it is, too. You'll see. It breaks Bruin's heart. He loves those pink pyjamas;

but perhaps he won't get wind of it this time."

"Oh, oh," said Ralph rather faintly. "Can you swim?"

"Can she swim?" echoed Seaton. "Can Vera swim, you fellows?"

He tinkled a banjo accompaniment, singing to it, "Can she sw-i-i-im?" in absurd mimicry of a popular music-hall singer; and the boat-load pushed off amid chaff and laughter. Ralph sculled in angry misery and felt himself a black spot upon the brightness of the day. Vera's strong figure, rowing stroke, swayed rhythmically before him: relentless, untiring, invincible. Her hat was off; her bright hair caught and played with the sunbeams; her feet were wide-planted. Those boyish hands of hers were covered with freckles; but her complexion—confound her!—(he saw it when she turned her head) was unspoiled by weather; and the nape of her neck was quite annoyingly white. She was so horridly strong that she did not turn a hair. Any other girl, as fat as that, would be puffing and dripping by this time. A real brute of a girl! That was what Ralph thought.

They shipped oars presently and let the boat drift down-stream that they might reach the bathing-place cool. And Seaton tinkled his banjo again as they drifted, and La Bercée sang music-hall songs to it in absurd broken English, and all

but Ralph joined in the chorus. Then they fell silent again in the growing heat and stillness of the day; and they drifted, drifted, drifted, for minutes that seemed to carry the freight of hours, and Ralph intercepted a deep look passing from Cedric, who leaned forward between his rudder lines, to Vera, who was helping to guide the boat with a careless oar. And then Carstairs, the wag, gave one vast snore; and, laughing again and still drifting, they came to their favourite bathing-place.

"I'll choose my tent," said Vera, with the pink pyjamas under her arm. "See that elder-bush? That's my tent. Throw me two towels, Sedgewick. Pile your clothes on that bank, boys, to cover me in case Mrs. Grundy comes along."

Soon from the elder-bush emerged a very droll Vera. The legs of Bruin's pink pyjamas were safety-pinned below her knees; the sleeves were rolled up to her armpits; the jacket was tied round her waist with her neck ribbon. "Oh, what a brute of a girl!" groaned Ralph again. "Her arms are the arms of Vulcan." But they were redeemed by their whiteness; and he could not deny that her ankles—strange, contradictory, feminine touch—were slender, and that her white feet, with their high insteps and narrow, pink heels and long, clinging toes, were an artist's dream. She came through the standing grass

with her careless, rolling gait and stood on the river bank: in Ralph's eyes a brute of a girl, in Cedric's his Cynthia of the minute, in the eyes of the boys just Vera of the Strong Heart.

"Now then, Jack!" she cried, and heaved the small dog in; then retreated from the river and, with a dashing dive, was in the water.

"Vera is not really Bruin's cub at all; she 's the daughter of a river god," said Alfred Seaton, watching her from the bank before he took his plunge.

She lay on her back in the water, placidly as in a hammock, looking up at the sky; or she turned on her side and forged away up-stream with a dashing, clashing stroke; or she swam straight ahead, with steady vigour; or she trod water, pretending to be a dog. Jack was delighted. He barked at her, shivering and dripping, from the bank; and she swore affably back at him. And Ralph and Cedric sat side by side and watched her; and tried to talk to each other, but found no common tongue.

Seaton and Vera together gave La Bercée a swimming lesson. The French boy was no coward; but he was thin and hard and anything but buoyant; and he took things too flippantly. When he sank for the eighth time Vera said:

"I shan't bother to save your life any more, La Bercée; so you can just stop at the bottom or go ashore."

He went ashore, followed by Vera; for Mrs. Grundy was seen coming down-stream: two of her, in company with an old and a young Mr. Grundy. Vera lay covered with the boys' clothes: a heaving heap, which the Grundy family eyed with suspicion. This danger of a censorious world over, she took one more dive, “just for luck,” came ashore, shook herself like a dog, squeezed the water from her hair; and vowed she would be dressed the first of all. Ralph's malign eyes saw the grotesque in her full, dripping figure, rather cruelly outlined by the clinging pink pyjamas, with the bright hair all dank and dimmed and straightened. He had a moment's triumph.

Then he looked again. Her flesh was of a warmer whiteness than before, as if she had caught the thrill of sun and water; not a shiver in the whole of her. And as she went through the thick grass, rolling a little in her gait, laughing her fearless laugh, throwing friendly curses at the excited terrier at her heels, Ralph saw her for one sick moment as her boys saw her: Vera, the unique, the invincible.

She did not bother to be dressed first after all; but came from her elder-bush in a leisurely way, smoking a cigarette, and sat and dried her hair in the sun until the kink came back into it and she could twist it up again. And very soon corks were popping for luncheon, the bright day wearing away to evening so fast—to all but Ralph

—that Bruin was home first. A tired, angry Bruin, who waited for them at the boat-house.

"My aunt!" exclaimed Vera. "Those pyjamas!"

Bruin's finger was pointing to a heap of crumpled pink; and Ralph thought, "Now she is going to get it!"

And she did get it, but it was all on account of the pyjamas: "The suit of his heart," Vera murmured, really rather penitent. He scolded her as he would have scolded a small child who had stolen the jam; and she was rather sweet to him: tolerant of his rage, as a strong mother will forgive the bullying of her boy baby, knowing that "he will be good soon."

"Great Scot!" murmured Ralph in disgust. "If he thinks she's a kid still, why does n't he whip her and lock her up? It would do her all the good in the world."

So he left Bruin raging, the boys doggedly housing the boat and standing by Vera; and escaped to his inn. The inn-keeper, who was watching for him, came to meet him through the summer twilight.

"A gentleman is here, inquiring for you, sir," he said, speaking low. "He came this afternoon. Asked for Mr. Mandeville, but said Mr. Lister would do as well. He had got the name of Mr. Lister from the villagers, sir. I would n't have let on."

The man had put two and two together, and Ralph was open-handed with his money.

"Hang it all!" said Ralph, feeling that the crisis had come too soon. "What sort of a fellow is he?"

"Tall gent, sir. Middle-aged, fair, but going grey. Don't-mind-if-I-do-knock-you-down sort of gentleman, sir, but quite *the* gentleman, too. Took it quite cool when he heard you was out. Said he could wait here a year or two, if we'd got decent things to eat in the place. He's having supper now, sir."

"Let me have a squint at him," said Ralph. "It's old Oxonford, of course—must be."

The landlord went in to speak to his guest, so that Ralph could peer through the crack of the open door. Oxonford, with an air of solid calm, was consuming cold beef and pickles and ale.

"Right-O!" said Ralph, when the landlord reappeared. "I may not be able to come back, but this will square things, eh? Tell him I always come in at 10.30. I want all the time I can get. See?"

The landlord saw quite well. It was then about nine o'clock. Ralph went hot-foot back to the Cedar House. The crisis had come. He must see Cedric and hit out straight. Now or never.

By this time Bruin's rage was abating. Vera, who had ordered a good supper, had him by the

arm and was walking him masterfully up and down the lawn, soothing him. Some of the boys lingered still by the river; but Cedric, very weary, had gone indoors to throw himself down on the sofa in the little study which he shared with Seaton. Ralph came through the open French windows and, seeing Cedric there, stalked to the mantelpiece and lighted a candle.

"What 's that for?" asked Cedric.

"I have something to say to you."

"Well, can't you talk in the dark?"

"I can't see you in the dark."

"I should think you have seen me enough to-day," said Cedric; and at that bitter speech the hate that had been love welled up in Ralph's heart and overflowed.

"I 've seen enough of this madness of yours!" he cried. "You sicken me. What is to be the end of it all?"

As Cedric gathered himself up from the sofa and faced his twin, he was paler than usual; his brows were drawn in one dark line of anger or pain; physical weariness emphasised his infirmity of body. He spoke with deliberation.

"We may as well have it out. If you are speaking of Vera Droylsden, be careful; for I happen to love her."

"Oh, love her, by all means," said Ralph, sneering. "That 's all right. Love her, by all means; but marry her—no!"

"Why not?" inquired Cedric coolly.

"Why not! Can you ask? She is not of our class. She is a real out-and-out shocker. She has the manners and speech of a stable boy. Fancy her with our mother or Evelyn Manners! It can't be done. The Mandevilles don't marry like that. Love her, by all means," he repeated, "but marry her—no!" And he mentioned Prissy Hills.

Cedric's smile was maddening.

"You can't defend her," Ralph said; and again Cedric smiled.

"I don't defend her," he said haughtily. "Take it which way you please, that she is above or beneath defence. I am not accountable to you or to any one that I know of for my actions. She is the woman I love; and if I choose to marry a kitchen-maid, my position is strong enough. And damn your Prissy Hills!" he added, with sudden, singular fury.

Ralph lost all self-control.

"Are you so very sure that you are the heir?" he cried; and out came the whole story of the toss.

The raging boy looked like his father as he told it: his father, whom Heaven had struck down in the full heat of anger; and Cedric faced him, frail, white, contemptuous. Vera, about to enter by the French window, stopped short in amazement.

"And the devil turned that coin," Ralph was saying, "when it came down tails. You, the heir! You!"

Love, turned to hate, looked scorn at Cedric's blighted limb. And here Vera showed herself strong indeed. She longed to rush in and flood out the cruel words in tenderness and crush the cruel speaker with her wrath. But she knew the heart of Cedric, who, in a moment of most precious confidence, had said, "I love you, Vera, because you are not sorry for me."

So Vera turned away and waited by the river.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. MANNERS INTERFERES

RALPH, the runaway, made another bolt. Walking through the still, warm night, getting lifts in haycarts, and at last taking train to Bedringham, he was at Carshalton Court before Oxonford had finished his leisurely breakfast in Oxfordshire. For Ralph, who, by separation from Cedric, seemed to lose a full half of his nature, was driven by hot, blind instincts. Pride of race, dread of the blur Vera would be upon their House—these were his excuses for treachery. They seemed to him to be genuine enough, for he was all confused by the clash of jealousy and impotent Hate, dread child of once potent Love, and the sick desire of revenge. And so he turned traitor. Lady Carshalton heard the whole story of Vera; and a squalid enough story it seemed to her. Of his own quarrel with Cedric and of the affair of the tossed coin Ralph said nothing, but he dropped judicious hints of Prissy Hills, just to save waste of energy; for go back to Littlebury he would not. Poor Lady Carshalton wrung her hands in despair. She did not know which girl seemed the more detestable,

but thought that Prissy might at least be harmless. At the mere hint of this Ralph took on a gay Don Juan tone, and rejoiced secretly to see that here was the end of Littlebury.

"That 's all right, mother," he said loftily. "I don't want to vex you and I don't really care about the silly little thing. That 's all at an end, so don't worry."

"But Cedric!" exclaimed the poor lady. "Is this Miss Droylsden really so terrible, Ralph? What is she like? Is she pretty?"

"She 's a Colossus of a girl," replied Ralph; and went on to describe her horrid appearance. Vera would have laughed to hear him: it was all so true and yet it was not the whole truth. But Lady Carshalton felt a little calmer.

"He cannot continue to like her," she said.

"Not if he can be got to see her as she really is," replied Ralph. "But will he ever? That is the question."

It seemed to Lady Carshalton that there was not a minute to be lost. She was for telegraphing to Oxonford to inspect Miss Droylsden and come home at once; but at the critical moment Mrs. Manners arrived.

"I 'll be off," said Ralph, when he saw the lady's carriage rolling up the drive. "For goodness' sake, mother, don't tell that woman anything."

He might as well have told the world not to

go round. In ten minutes Mrs. Manners had the whole story.

She was a woman of forty-five, handsome in a style of determined elegance. Her diplomacy was of the transparent order. She knew quite well that people saw through her; but, what matter, if she gained her ends, which were, after all, comparatively harmless, though worldly. She had cultivated Lady Carshalton of late; and Lady Carshalton had begun to confide in her and to draw some occult comfort from her most correct and adjectival sympathy. George Oxonford shrugged his shoulders over what he considered an empty intimacy. "The best of women must talk," was his excuse for his lady, whom he loved to worship on her lonely pedestal, set high by grief above a tawdry world.

Mrs. Manners squeezed her distressed friend's hand now and said:

"Dear Lady Carshalton, how I feel for you! So distressing! I used to regret that I had no boys; but really!—I should be so very, very glad if I could help you in any way; but what can we poor women do?"

Lady Carshalton wiped her eyes: such soft brown eyes, with quite a girlish look in them still; and murmured, "What, indeed?" and thought helplessly of Oxonford absent.

Mrs. Manners leaned back in her chair and looked thoughtful.

"I think I know what I should do, were I in your place," she said at last. "I should ask Miss Droylsden to stay here at once. Let dear Cedric see the difference between her and the women of his world."

"But he never has had a world," said Lady Carshalton plaintively. "Think of the life we have led! Poor Carshalton, you know——"

He had become "Poor Carshalton" to the wife he had quelled: this was all that was left of the gay rake. Mrs. Manners shrugged her shoulders.

"Yet ask her," she urged. "Boys get the right instinct in the right surroundings. And if my daughter, Evelyn, would be of any use by way of contrast——"

Lady Carshalton knew at once what this meant, but she was quite willing.

"Thank you," she said. "If dear Evelyn would come at the same time——"

"Dear Evelyn" certainly would: her mother would see to that. Lady Carshalton's letter to Vera Droylsden, revised and edited by Mrs. Manners, was diplomatic and non-committal. It was written and posted that very day: Mrs. Manners saw to that too; and she went home and set her maid to work at once on pretty toilettes for Evelyn.

George Oxonford came home that evening; and to him, with some tremors, Lady Carshalton confessed her deed. She was so unaccustomed

to act without him now that she felt a little guilty.

"Not a bad move on the part of Mrs. Manners," he remarked, twirling his moustache and staring at his boots.

"Did you see the girl, Oxonford?" asked she.

"Yes, I saw her. Her father is a dear old boy. I'll swear he's quite innocent in this matter."

"But the girl, the girl!" insisted my lady, with gentle impatience. "My boy does not want to marry Mr. Droylsden. What do you think of the girl? Is she really terrible?"

"What has Ralph told you?"

"He says she swears and smokes like a stable-boy and that she is dreadful to look at—a Colossus of a girl." (My lady smiled faintly.) "Is she all that, Oxonford?"

Oxonford gave a short laugh.

"She's got a skin like the palest wild rose you ever saw. Let us be just: she really has that."

"Oxonford, you are teasing me! It is unkind."

He came to her and took her hands.

"My dear lady," he said very earnestly, "you know what blunderers we men are. We can't describe our impressions. Perhaps it is because we see both sides of a question. But one thing I feel very clearly. You must not take this too much to heart, for I think Vera Droylsden will

marry Cedric in the end. She is a strong character."

"Oxonford, you like her!"—this reproachfully.

"I don't know," he said. "Have n't I told you that I don't know? I don't want to wrestle with her. She is strong, I tell you, mind and body."

"Oh, oh!" sighed Lady Carshalton, thinking, poor thing! that every one seemed strong but herself. All her life she had been overmatched.

"Dear lady," George Oxonford said very gently then, giving her back her hands, "have you not found out that the other side of strength is gentleness?"

"You have tried to teach me that," she answered, with a look of gratitude, "but I am slow to learn, dear Oxonford—a slow, timid pupil!"

She gave him these little rewards of intimate speech now and then: gifts from heaven they were, but a trial to self-control. He had to leave her abruptly; and when he was gone she sat very still, looking down at the hands he had held, forgetful awhile of her troubled wifeness and motherhood. The facts of life came back upon her soon, with a rush of self-reproach. She went to visit her husband.

Carshalton had shown some improvement of late. He was able to move his right leg a little and to clasp and unclasp his right hand. Once

or twice, when irritated, he had rapped out a naughty oath; but failed to repeat it when the excitement that had pushed him into speech was over.

"Quite comfortable it is and like old times to hear him swearing again," said Nana. "But it's little he can do of it now, poor thing! Ah! The One above is patient and long-suffering; yet He smites heavy when He smites at all."

Spotless order reigned in the sick-room, which was beautiful with scentless flowers. Lord Carshalton's bed was drawn up to the open window that he might feel the breath of summer upon him. It was one of those days of sun and cloud when the earth veils herself in shadows and emerges cool, beautiful, and brilliant into the dazzle of light again. A patient donkey, with nodding head, traversed and re-traversed the Carshalton lawns, mowing them, spurred by the persistent goading of an under-gardener. Carshalton, propped high on his pillows, followed with his eyes the shifting light and shade in the park, or the short, fluttering flight of small birds across the window, or the high, airy wheeling of pigeons, flashing silvery in the bursts of sunlight. And, now and again, sighing, he turned to watch the nurse, who sat sewing in unbroken calm.

She rose when Lady Carshalton entered the room; answered a question or two; then left

husband and wife together. Lady Carshalton, with a hurried look of fear, knelt down by the bed. She had never done such a thing before; could not have ventured to kneel so near him. But now she took his unresisting hand, and laid her face down on it and prayed God to have mercy—just a little mercy—on her boys and on her husband; on herself, too, that she might remain faithful. She prayed aloud, at last, without knowing it. Then, coming to herself a little from this unwonted stress of feeling, she heard the stammering tongue say, "You fool! You confounded young fool!" and saw the terrible tears of the paralytic streaming from her husband's eyes.

Hastily she called the nurse.

"He moves a little easier, my lady, I think," the woman said kindly.

"God may have mercy after all," the other woman answered, very low.

Oxonford, meanwhile, had found Ralph in the gun-room; and there, sitting astride a high stool, he lectured the boy pretty severely on the subject of his misdeeds.

"The girl, Vera Droylsden, is coming here with Cedric," he ended. "Mrs. Manners's move, that! Whether a good one or not, time will show. But I should advise you, Ralph, to behave civilly to Miss Droylsden. Diplomacy demands it; and—what is more—decency demands it."

There's more in this than a mere marriage question."

There was more: much more than Oxonford knew; for he was in complete ignorance of the affair of the toss. Ralph smiled rather superciliously.

"What are you grinning at, you young dog?" said Oxonford.

"You're not a bad old sort," replied Ralph; and Oxonford grunted uneasily, feeling the burden of years for a moment.

"Of course she'll come," said Ralph irrelevantly. "You bet!"

Yes, she would come. Vera read Lady Carshalton's letter with uplifted eyebrows, and passed it to Cedric.

"Your brother is a sneak," she said. "I don't know anything about your mother. Is this a trap?"

"I don't know much about my mother either," confessed Cedric; "but I'm sure she is not clever. If there's a trap she didn't set it. What shall you do, Vera?"

"I shall accept," she replied shortly; and then Cedric told her about the tossing for the heirship.

She took a penny from her pocket.

"Heads or tails, Cedric?"

"Heads."

"Heads it is. Best out of three!" she cried.

"We'll play fair. Heads or tails again?"

"Tails."

"It 's heads this time. One more go. Which, Cedric?"

"Tails."

"Tails it is!" cried Vera. "You see we keep the title!"

CHAPTER IX

CARSHALTON COURT

OF course Mr. Droylsden must be told about it now. It was a shock to him. He had married in middle age and when his young wife died he had returned, saddened but calm, to his dreams and his books. Vera seemed to him still a child.

Cedric played his part in this awkward, necessary interview manfully enough, but he felt himself a bad third with father and daughter. He left Vera kneeling at Bruin's feet, and wandered alone by the river, haunted by the vision of her strength, so strangely, suddenly, toned to utter sweetness. He had never seen her thus before. Wonder and restlessness took him. When would she come out to him?

"My little girl! My little girl!" poor Bruin was saying. "I never thought of this. Why will you grow up? You were such a droll little child, Vera: such a fat little tomboy! I have not looked after you well. And now I have lost you."

"You have n't lost me at all, Bruin," she declared. "You've found me, my dear old man."

You will live with us when we are married. Cedric says so. There's pots of money—oh, pots! Carshalton Court is big enough to hold all my ancestors. And I shall want you, Bruin, dear."

But Bruin shook his head.

"You are not old enough, my child:—do not know the world enough. How can you face it? How make your way among all these proud people? And he is a mere boy. Boys' love!—Ah, child, you do not know! If your mother had lived!"

Vera raised her head and looked at him with a widening of her curiously vivid eyes.

"I'm not funky of any one," she said; "not even of Cedric. You think me a child, but I've lived among boys and I know a lot, and I am not jumping in the dark. Cedric is very cold. No one can get into the heart of him. Ralph lived there once, right inside; but he's turned out now. That seems rather a shame, though Ralph is a first-class sneak. Cedric is cold, I tell you, though he does n't seem so now, because he's in love. Don't you ever read novels, Bruin? Your education has been neglected! I've read 'em, so I know—oh, lots! And I'm not dull. *I can see a church by daylight*—that's your dear Shakespeare. Cedric abominates pity. I understand him as no other girl could, because, Bruin dear, you've been so good to me and have let me have my eyes and my freedom

and this ripping, ripping time with the boys. I've thought it all out. I love him well enough to hold off from him and never hurt his pride and never show him how deadly sorry I am for him. And he must marry. He will be the Earl of Carshalton and will want an heir. I tell you he's mine—mine by divine right; and I'll keep and hold him."

She looked up at her father, unsmiling—Vera seldom smiled; but with an odd, arresting brightness in her green eyes.

"My poor child!" said Bruin. "It means suffering."

"I'm not afraid of suffering," said Vera.

She got up and kissed him and told him to buck up and look pleasant, like the good old Bruin he was. Then she went into the garden and strolled away in search of Cedric, who felt a curious relief when he saw the familiar Vera coming carelessly towards him, with her dog at her heels.

"It's all serene," she announced coolly. "Now all I've got to do is to write to Lady Carshalton and get a few togs together. Aunt Eva must come and run things here. Think I can take Jack with me, Cedric? I never go anywhere, you know, without him."

"Better put it that way to mother," suggested Cedric, grinning.

"By Jove, I will!" said Vera. "You see, I

am what I am: that 's my only excuse for existence. There 's no use in pretending, eh, old man? But I 'll try to do the civil thing, of course."

In effect her letter to Lady Carshalton was the letter of an up-to-date schoolboy who was trying very hard indeed to do the civil thing. There was careful avoidance of slang, and the sentences went off short, like pistol shots. Jack was mentioned with determination. I 'll come, if you 'll have my dog: that was the gist of it.

My lady showed this epistle to Nana, who said:

"Language is n't what it was in my young days; but I 've seen worse letters than this, my lady. Better bring a dog with her than a maid: they 're that troublesome!"

"Oh, Nana, you are not siding with this terrible girl?" cried Lady Carshalton.

"Never against you, my lady," replied Nana. "Never against you. But there 's manners that seem pretty and is n't, as we have good cause to know; and there 's good hearts under funny skins. I 'm not likely to let the young lady off too easy: I know what 's due to the Family. But I 'll look at her through my own eyes, my lady, if you please, and take my own judgments."

Nana was slinging cunning little stones at Mrs. Manners, whom she disliked exceedingly.

And Lady Carshalton showed the letter to Oxonford, who grinned and said:

"We 'll hire a valet to unpack young Droylsden's suit-cases and lay out his coats and set his trouser-stretchers and his boot-trees. And I 'll meet the young fellow in my dog-cart, in case he 's shy with women!"

"Oxonford," cried my lady, "I am afraid of her! I have never met that kind of woman, though of course I know there are plenty of them."

And Mrs. Manners, having read the letter, returned it with a scornful shrug of her elegant shoulders and thought with triumph of her dainty daughter, Evelyn.

The transparent diplomatist drove her daughter over to Carshalton Court just at the time when Vera and Cedric were expected. She knew the value of contrast. Vera arrived, driving Oxonford's high-stepping mare: Oxonford himself sitting meekly beside her, Cedric taking a back seat with Jack in his arms. Miss Droylsden brought the mare round the turn of the drive very neatly and capably, and the old butler heard her say:

"Not so dusty for a beginner, eh, Mr. Oxonford?"

And Oxonford answered dryly, "Anything but dusty, Miss Droylsden."

Vera wore a severely-cut coat and skirt, a high man's collar and tie, and the inevitable boy's sailor hat, blown on one side in her rapid drive. She walked carelessly into the drawing-

room with Cedric and got through the ordeal of introduction and afternoon tea (which she loathed) with a gentlemanly ease and indifference which Oxonford found infinitely amusing. Lady Carshalton was so nervous that she poured the tea over the side of the cups and then apologised faintly; Mrs. Manners was supercilious; Evelyn, the model of grace and propriety. Jack, having been severely scratched by Lady Carshalton's Persian cat, whined and shivered in Vera's skirts.

"It was most awfully boring," Vera said afterwards to Cedric; "and it was all I could do not to say so. But your mother is a dear, Cedric, though, of course, she does n't like me. Thank Heaven that Manners woman is gone now! Evelyn Manners is a ripping pretty girl. Oh, here's Ralph. How d'you do, Ralph? Don't you think Evelyn Manners is a most ripping pretty girl?"

Ralph did think so. He also chose to think it great impertinence in Vera to say so. He nodded to Cedric; Cedric nodded to him. Inwardly there was hatred, outwardly an armed neutrality, where once love had reigned.

Vera Droylsden struck a strange new note in this fate-haunted, beautiful, ancestral place, but she struck it with no uncertain sound; and so, by very sureness of touch, she made it ring true. The servants were with her, down to the very kitchen-maid, who got into disgrace with the

cook for peering at Miss Droylsden through the green baize door that bounded the kitchen quarters at an hour when she should have been minding her potatoes. Vera saw the eager, hot little face and smiled her rare smile. It was her directness—her want of pretentiousness—that won the servants' hearts.

"My! She's a whopper, but she's nice!" said the little kitchen-maid.

And Hawkins, the portly, clean-handed old butler, who overheard her, deigned to smile at the obscure little scrubber.

"She looks as if she'd been born in that manish coat and skirt," said Jefferson, my lady's maid. "But whatever will she look like in evening dress? It passes imagination. I have n't had a sight of her things: she had whisked them all away before I knocked at her door. Said she'd have left them to me, if she'd known I was coming. But a sight she'll be this evening, for sure!"

Vera had spent much thought on her evening gown—a very foreign luxury. "I'm too solid for muslin," she had said. "No pretty innocence for me!" and finally decided, "I'll have white Liberty satin, cut to the verge of indecency."

There was not much of the frock at all. From what there was her figure emerged with triumphant strength. There was no fineness of line or subtlety of movement, but there was full

young vigour, enough and to spare. Those boyish hands of hers finished her firm, bare arms very quaintly. Her classic outline of head, her even-toned skin, and the simple dressing of her crinkly red hair redeemed her massive style from coarseness. Lady Carshalton, herself looking like a gracious old-time portrait, with the wonderful touch of that artist, Jefferson, upon her, hardly knew whether to feel relieved or scandalised. Evelyn Manners, correct and dainty and fashionable from the hands of a French maid, behaved like a decorous little mystery; answering Vera's friendly advances in monosyllables; lifting her thickly-lashed eyelids to peep inscrutably at the terrible girl; then veiling her dark eyes again in a graceful silence. Ralph was very glum, feeling his wrongs and his ignoble rôle. Oxonford, who was dining at the Court, listened to Cedric's coldly brilliant talk; while Vera, helping herself in an able-bodied manner to what she liked, threw in a vivid comment now and again and paid gentlemanlike attention to Lady Carshalton, who answered her with the nervous tremors of a girl of seventeen.

After dinner Oxonford took Miss Droylsden to the billiard room and gave her a lesson in billiards, while Cedric looked on. At half-past ten Vera put up her cue and said:

"I'm just dog-tired. Ralph and Evelyn Manners are outside on the terrace, so Lady

Carshalton must be alone. Shall I go and say good-night to her? Will you come, too, Mr. Oxonford? Lady Carshalton's in terror of me: thinks I'm a bomb that may go off at any minute."

Lady Carshalton was in her favourite room, the small early Victorian drawing-room; where the dainty pink and blue and white of chintz and china shone softly in the candle-light. She was leaning back in her chair with her beautiful, beruffled hands clasped over a book on her knee: *The Imitation of Christ*. She may have been reading, but now she was dreaming of the past and of her dead baby girl and of the long way of suffering that lay behind her. Something had come to her at last: some faint light, seen from afar and growing brighter, that made all things—even this last trial—possible to her. Resignation—so dull a thing in youth, so beautiful in middle age—shed a wistful peace around her. The very title of the book she held, *The Imitation of Christ*, rang like a poem, great in truth, pointing out the Only Way. And so my lady sat: a gentle, high-bred figure, renouncing all joy, accepting all sorrow: her very stillness eloquent as her youth had never been.

George Oxonford, rugged, weather-beaten, grizzled, commanding, stepped across the threshold of that room as if it were a shrine; and Vera had a swift moment of enlightenment.

"Don't move, Lady Carshalton," she said in her deep, muffled voice. "You are tired."

She bent her strong young body; took the frail hands, with *The Imitation of Christ* between them; kissed them, and was gone.

My lady looked up at George Oxonford.

"What a strange girl!" she said. "What a strange girl!"

A few minutes later old Nana knocked at Vera's door. The girl had blown out her candles; and, still in her evening dress, was smoking a cigarette, kneeling, her head and shoulders well out of the window.

"Come in," she cried. And Nana entered.

"My lady has sent me to see if you want anything, Miss Droylsden," she said.

Vera laid her cigarette carefully on the window-ledge and got up from her knees.

"You 're Nana, I suppose. I 'll just light up so that we can see each other."

She struck a wax vesta from her own pocket match-box and lighted two candles. Then she turned to the old servant.

"Look at me well," she said. "I 'm a fair holy terror, you know. Now then, can you look at me and live?"

Nana chuckled.

"I 'm not delicate," she answered grimly. "If shocks could have killed me, I 'd have been dead long since."

"I believe you," said Vera, making for her cigarette and puffing at it out of the window to keep it alive. "What a house this is! Topping, of course, and all that; but there's tragedy in the very air. I've no nerves, or I'd be afraid to get into that old four-poster. Is there a sliding panel in this room? I'll bet there is. And Cain and Abel in the old tapestry on the staircase are alive, I tell you—alive! Where is he, Nana? Is he in this wing?"

"Two doors off, down this corridor," answered Nana. "There's a suite of three rooms for him and his nurse. He can draw his leg up and down in the bed a bit now, but he'll not likely move far again until he takes his long last journey."

Vera puffed hard out of the window. The stillness of the night was broken by the cry of night-jars; and soon there was another sound: George Oxonford riding away down the avenue. Vera threw the end of her cigarette away and came to Nana.

"Take me out of this frock, there's a good soul! Jefferson put me in. I don't know how she did it. She's a witch, Jefferson is. Look at the way she dresses Lady Carshalton. The whole picture is there complete, but I'm blessed if I can see how it's done."

"You admire my lady?" asked the woman, with a keen look.

"Don't you?" asked Vera, with another.

"I love my lady," said the old woman solemnly.

"I 'll love her if she 'll let me," said Vera, with that curious, bright widening of her eyes. "But I 'll not give up Cedric—understand that, Nana. He 's mine by divine right."

"'T will be by divine right of suffering then, young lady," said Nana, the prophetess, unconsciously echoing Bruin; and went away, muttering and shaking her head.

The old woman crept back an hour later and opened Miss Droylsden's door very softly. The girl was lying fast asleep in the moonlight, one firm hand thrown out and grasping the flowered curtain of the four-poster. She breathed deeply and quietly. But for her crinkly hair, spread upon the pillow, she would have looked like a strong, sleeping boy.

Nana closed the door again and stole away down the corridor. Lord Carshalton's nurse came out and spoke to her. He was very sleepless, she said.

"'T is the moonlight," said old Nana. "Hark at the bats shrieking and the dogs baying in the stable yard!"

A tall clock below chimed midnight, cathedral-like, as Nana went to her room across bars of moonlight falling through the windows of the long gallery. Somewhere in the east wing a door banged suddenly. The great house had all the rest it ever knew.

CHAPTER X

"PALS"

THE first shock of meeting over, every one settled down to a modified discomfort. Vera, the intruder, still seemed more at ease than the rest. She had thought out her general behaviour beforehand. She had to talk her fluent slang; for, really, it was her only language; but she avoided expletives. She was very civil to every one, yet seemed to have an infinite capacity for amusing herself and keeping out of the way. She learned to throw a fly and to drive the motor-car as expertly as Cedric or Ralph; and spent the whole of one wet morning in practising strokes at billiards, talking lazily to Cedric, who was on the sofa with a book. She smoked out-of-doors or in the billiard room, saying as easily as a man, "Do you mind, Lady Carshalton?" Of course Lady Carshalton did not mind: it was her desire that Miss Droylsden should shock Cedric. But she wished to be shocked herself, too; and, somehow, she was only puzzled.

"What a strange girl!" she said again to

George Oxonford. "It is like having a man staying in the house; and you know, Oxonford, she is just the sort of companion to Cedric that a man would be. They never try to be alone together, and they don't behave in the least like lovers. Can it be good breeding, or is it only indifference?"

"Are not the words synonymous nowadays?" he asked rather cynically.

"Oxonford, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I know, and I can't answer you. I don't understand Vera Droylsden. But I think she understands Cedric, and I think she will hold him."

Lady Carshalton's sigh was rather perfunctory.

"What will Mrs. Manners say?" she wondered.

Oxonford glanced at her keenly.

"In Miss Droylsden's own language, I should like to remark, 'Let her say what she jolly well pleases!'" he replied; and added, "She will have to be content with Ralph."

"Ah!" said Lady Carshalton, with her faint smile. "Well, no one could possibly object to Evelyn."

"Oh, she is most correct."

"You do not like her?"

"I dislike her mother."

"That's hard on the girl."

"She's her mother's daughter," he declared, "trained to decoy. Look at her now."

Ralph and Evelyn Manners could be seen,

playing tennis. The girl, spotlessly dressed, played daintily and quietly. Every movement was grace. Ralph fagged her balls for her and received decorous thanks, with rare, mysterious unveilings of those darkly fringed eyes. Once or twice he waited for the glance he coveted. It came: swift, fleeting, thrilling. Then the game went on again with great decorum.

"I think it is all quite natural," said Miss Manners's hostess half-anxiously.

"It has become second nature," returned Oxonford grimly.

"She is a shy little thing."

"H'm!" grunted he. "A quiet hand sets snares the best."

"You are hard on women!"

"Well, they are snarers of men. Oh yes, they are! Does n't our greatest modern playwright say so? He knows. What does n't he know?"

"He is a terrible man," said Lady Carshalton. "I think he is too clever to ring quite true. I do not think I like these exceedingly clever people, Oxonford."

"I don't like girls," said he. "They 're artful. And I stick to it that Miss Evelyn is a deal sharper than she looks. I have n't chaperoned her and Ralph out riding for nothing. She talks to me, but she aims at him; and every shot tells. Ralph is in her toils. She rides well, too."

Lady Carshalton sighed again.

"Why does not Vera ride?" she asked. "You offered her the bay mare, did n't you?"

"She says she must thin down a bit before appearing on horseback. That is the reason she gives."

"And the real reason, Mr. Misanthrope?"

"I tell you I don't understand Vera Droylsden," he answered. "But I fancy it is because of Cedric. Yes, I know she will leave him for hours and go strolling and smoking with her tike at her heels; but she won't do anything that will show his lameness up. Now is that cage-making or loyalty? Which?"

Lady Carshalton made no answer; but her brown eyes softened very prettily.

That very day Lord Carshalton's nurse fell ill: the long strain had been too much for her; she must have rest and change. It happened that the new nurse's arrival was delayed for a day or two. Nana could sit with my lord during the day and sleep within call at night; but she could not turn or lift him.

"In the words of Scripture," remarked Vera profanely, "Here am I. Send me."

She bared her firm arms and said to Nana, "There's not a man born that I can't lift. And I'll be gentle, Nana, and obey you like a trained spaniel. Nana, I'm dying to see him and help him. Do let me!"

The strong will conquered. Nana stood guar-

antee for Miss Droylsden to my lady, speaking with no uncertain voice. Nevertheless the old woman watched the girl very keenly in Lord Carshalton's room. Vera entered, unafraid, took the invalid's hand, and said:

"Don't try to speak. I'm your new nurse. I'm a rum one to look at, but I'm all right, really, you know. Quite respectable and all that and as strong as an engine. And," she added, in a voice that seemed to come from the depths of her being, "I've taken to you awfully, so you've got to like me. We're going to be pals, you know. Now, don't say anything. I know you feel all right about me. We're pals, we are!"

She laid his hand down gently; and Nana thought that Carshalton's eyes were wistful as the girl moved away. It might be only fancy; yet, knowing him as she did, she could not but think that Miss Droylsden's methods were likely to suit this poor shattered humourist. And Vera told her afterwards that the helpless hand had pressed her own very faintly at the word, "pals."

The two nurses pulled well together. Nana, who had helped the professional nurse, had the science; Vera the strength. Carshalton was lifted, turned, fed, washed, very capably. On the second day Nana found her occupation almost gone.

"I know the ropes now," said Vera. "I can keep these rooms as clean as a pin, you 'll see. It's all routine work in these chronic cases, and I can do it right enough, Nana, if you 'll let me suck your brains now and again. Oh, I won't throw the furniture about. Do you think I can't be quiet?"

She could be quiet—amazingly so. She was as deft and as strong as a sailor, going about her cleaning and tidying with a masculine absence of haste and that slight characteristic roll in her gait which seemed to defy the world and all mischance. She wore a butcher-blue sailor blouse and short serge skirt, with one of Nana's clean plain aprons pinned on when there was work to do. In times of idleness she sat reading, in full view of Carshalton, whose eyes, when he was awake, rarely left her. Once or twice she had read him an amusing paragraph, and Carshalton's gestures encouraged her; but finally the immoderate laughter, typical of the aphasic patient, warned her of unwisdom. His frequent tears seemed to her hardly less terrible. When he was dozing—and this was often, for his poor, muddled brain was soon wearied—she would drop her book and look at him with an infinite pity. Cedric, entering softly once, caught this look on her face. He insisted that she should come out with him for an hour; and sent Nana to take her place.

They sat on the terrace, and Vera sniffed the sweet air with a sigh that seemed like relief.

"You are tired," said Cedric, linking his arm in hers.

Vera sat very still under that rare caress.

"No," she said, "I'm never tired. That word is not in my dictionary. I don't even know what it means."

"What are you, then, if not tired?" he asked, turning his scrutiny upon her. "Come, you've got to tell me."

Vera considered how much she could tell him. Not the tale of the world's full sorrow beating at the flood-gates of her heart; not the whole tale of her being's strong stirring by the tragedy of that spoiled life—clouded, shrouded, rendered impotent as by death, yet with none of death's rest and majesty. She could not—must not—speak the cry of her heart: "He is like you, Cedric, like you, my poor, lamed, hurt boy: even for that I could not choose but love him!" No, Cedric was her junior in all but his divine birthright of suffering: a perverse, domineering boy, who would be insulted by sympathy, scared and alienated by a full human confidence. Thus, rightly or wrongly, Vera Droylsden judged; and determined to hold him by reticence, as many a Jonathan holds his David through life and even beyond death.

"I'm frightfully sorry for him," she said.

"But, d' you know, Cedric, I think he 'll speak again. He tries hard not to say that same beastly sentence: I 'm sure of it. And he wants to know who I am; I am sure he does. Do you think I might tell him?"

"Do as you like. We all do as we like here—always have done," said Cedric flippantly.

Vera turned and looked him full in the face.

"Are you sorry for him, old man? Fond of him?" she asked.

"Ask another," Cedric answered. "Of course a fellow does n't like to see a man hit hard like that. He was a most awful rip, you know, but I rather liked him. He was interesting: one never knew what he would do next. But if you want the truth, Vera, I don't believe I am fond of anybody but you. You are such a good fellow. What an ass Ralph is making of himself with that Manners girl!" he exclaimed, with angry distaste, as he caught sight of two rather eloquent figures in the distance. "Of course it does n't matter to me, but——"

His eyebrows were drawn in that straight angry line of pain which Vera knew so well. The thought cut through her like a knife that he was missing Ralph in some strange physical way. His face was growing more worn, his features more sharpened, as if too fine-hewn by intellect. Was Cedric losing bodily, Ralph spiritually, by separation? For Vera knew well enough that

Ralph, the traitor, had once been loyalty itself to his twin.

“No, of course it does n’t matter to us,” she said. “He has n’t blighted our lives, you know: rather the other way, indeed, which is rather a sell for him. And Evelyn Manners is n’t half a bad little sort.”

“She’s a little peacock,” said Cedric contemptuously.

“Anyhow she’s not a fair holy terror like me.”

“You’re all right,” he said. “You suit me. It has been dull without you this last day or two. When is that nurse coming?”

“To-morrow,” said Vera. “But I’m glad she could n’t come at once. I was dying to see Lord Carshalton, and I never would, but for that.”

She sat still awhile, then said:

“I think I’ll go back to him till dinner-time, Cedric. So long!”

She strolled up-stairs, and as she turned the handle of Carshalton’s room the careless, dare-devil look left her face. Nana was not there: he was alone, it seemed. Vera had closed the door before noticing that Jack had followed her. On a sudden impulse she picked up the little dog and knelt down by the bed, holding him in her arms. Carshalton’s hand lay limp on the counterpane. She took it, and kissed it, and showed it to Jack, who set a friendly lick upon it.

“My dear old boy, my poor old boy,” she

said. "We're awfully fond of you, Jack and I. You're not alone here, see? Do try to understand. We're a queer lot, but we love you, my little cur and I."

Did he understand? Ah, who could tell? The terrible tears did not flow; the still more terrible laughter was silent. Lady Carshalton, crossing the doorway of the nurse's sleeping-room, stood petrified with comprehension. Then, gathering force from sheer dread, she drifted away, like some poor ghost who fears to meet the forceful eyes of mortals.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST WORD OF LOVE

IT was a sultry summer morning: a deadness of heat, up-gathering for storms. Hedges and foliage along the high-roads were thick with dust; the mown meadows were tanning under a relentless sun; flowers in the Carshalton gardens blazed over-gaudily against a sickly background of parched soil; the birds had fallen silent; a whole thirsting earth held up hands of prayer for the climax of rain.

Vera, having nothing else to do, was washing Jack in the stable-yard. Her skirt was turned up to her waist and safety-pinned behind; her arms were bare; her energy and language were in no way abated by the heat; for Jack objected to bathing. A groom, lazily swishing down a horse, stopped now and then to grin sympathetically at Miss Droylsden, who, the stable-staff had decided, was "a game 'un"; and presently Vera became aware of dainty, sun-hatted Evelyn peeping at her from a safe distance.

"Hello!" Vera said. "You can come a little nearer than that with safety, you know."

Evelyn approached slowly, as though drawn against her will.

"Stop there," cried Vera. "You are just beyond range of water spouts there. The tike's a good enough tike as a rule, but he's a demon in a bath and most damnably slippery when he's wet. I've nearly lost him twice. He hates water, and he just loves his dear fleas and knows this soap 'll kill them. Hard luck, eh, old man? There, it's all over! Spread that bath sheet for me, Thomas, while I hoick him out. Keep clear, Evelyn. He'll shake now like the locks of Jove."

She rubbed and petted and swore with vigour; and very soon Jack was free to go and roll in the dust again, after the manner of dogs newly cleaned. His mistress emptied and dried the bath, hung the towels over a door in the sun, let down her skirt, caught her hat from the ground, and said:

"Come for a stroll with me? The heat is consuming, but we'll find shady places in the park. Not too proud, eh?"

If Miss Manners was not proud she was certainly silent. The girls had gone through the gardens and were out in the side walk skirting the park before either spoke again. Then Evelyn asked, "Where is Cedric?"

"Don't know. Don't keep him in my pocket. Where's Ralph?"

"I don't keep him in mine either," answered Evelyn, with some spirit.

"And don't want to, do you?" asked the other girl. "You're not so fond of Ralph as he is of you. That's the real truth, is n't it?"

Evelyn wrinkled up her pretty forehead and said, "Sometimes I think I hate him, but——"

"But what?"

"I'm afraid of mother," burst out Evelyn.

"H'm!" said Vera. "She did n't send you here to catch Ralph, surely? More likely Cedric."

"Oh, Miss Droylsden——"

"Rot! Call me Vera."

"Vera, then——"

"Well, go on about mother. I'll make it easy for you. You were sent to cut me out, of course. That's plain enough."

"And I have n't done it," cried Evelyn, with a little hysterical laugh. "I could n't, if I tried ever so hard. And I don't want to. I'm afraid of Cedric: I think he's uncanny. And I'm really afraid of Ralph too. If I married him, he would kill my soul."

"Did n't know you had a soul," said Vera, looking at Evelyn in amazement; "but I suppose you may have. Poor child, you'd be better without one, as you happen to have a mother too. She came here yesterday, did n't she?"

"Yes. She was very angry when she heard you were with Lord Carshalton. She said——only

to me, of course—that Lady Carshalton was a born fool; and she scolded me because I had n't played the game at all cleverly. I begged her to take me away then, but she said there was always Ralph. Vera, it's all quite horrid. You don't know how poor we are. I've got to marry money; and Ralph will be rich, though he won't have the title and estates."

"Poor!" exclaimed Vera. "Why, you are always dressed like a little princess."

"Oh yes," said Evelyn bitterly, "it has to be done. I am to be sold, you know—to a prince, if possible. But we are really quite poor for our sort of people. Everything is all wrong. I ought to have been a boy and I was n't a boy; and the three younger ones are girls too, poor children! And so Bedringham Place will go to my cousin, Cecil. We can't raise any money on it. No, I must be sold: it is the only way."

"Marry cousin Cecil," said Vera shortly. "That's as simple as daylight. He's decent, I suppose, since he's your cousin?"

"He is married already, or mother would have thought of that. She was very furious yesterday. She said she had spent far more money than she could afford on my clothes to come here. And she will make it quite too wretched for me if I go home a failure."

"But you flirted with Ralph at first. You know you did. Awfully quietly; but still you flirted."

"I know. But it's rather nice to be liked, is n't it?"

"You ought to have tried Cedric: it was your duty."

"I don't like Cedric!" cried Evelyn. "I positively dislike him. Do forgive me, Vera, for telling the truth."

"I'll forgive you that queer little sin," said Vera dryly. "If you had liked him—I don't know. He's my monopoly."

"It would have been useless. I saw that from the first, though mother did not. She is deceived by her own wishes. Father says that is a little way diplomatists have. And it keeps them harmless. But I knew quite well you were too strong for me. There is only one person who could ever take Cedric from you; and that is Ralph. They were always all in all to each other, you know. I heard mother talking to Lady Carshalton about it yesterday. She said, 'What is this strange cloud that has come between your dear boys, dear Lady Carshalton?' And Lady Carshalton clasped her hands and got very vague, and said she prayed Heaven for them and for us all. And then mother patted Lady Carshalton's hand and said, 'Heaven will hear you, dearest friend, and all will again be well. Heart to heart your darling boys were born; heart to heart they must live and die.' Mother gets quite poetical sometimes, though never at

home. Vera, are you angry? What have I said?"

"I'm not angry, you poor little fool," said Vera roughly. "But if you don't want to get drenched to your skin, you had better take to your heels. Can you run, or can't you? Mr. Oxonford's cottage is the nearest. Give me your hand and buck up!"

The flare of the day had dropped into a dark stillness; the very heavens seemed lowered, threatening; the heat, under that dull, diminished canopy, grew more intense; the air was copper-coloured; all nature crouched so little under the gathering of an angry climax that the frightened fluttering of a bird seemed a sound great with omen.

"Ah, here it comes!" said Vera, speaking low as in a church.

The first drops were falling: slow, heavy, like the tolling of a bell; and the giant that sat above flashed his eye of light and growled low. Then faster, faster, came the hard whip of the rain, and sharper the downward stroke of the angry eye, and louder the roar above; and after that "the real original deluge," as Vera said, finding tongue again in sheer enjoyment of all this hurtling fury cooling itself and the hot, spent world. Relentlessly she dragged the panting Evelyn along and banged George Oxonford's gate so smartly behind her that he, busy over

accounts with a tenant, looked out of the window with more than a touch of irritation. Then he hurried out to meet the girls in his porch: Evelyn, in her drenched muslins, looking like a sweet, spoiled flower; Vera shaking herself like a great wet dog. His man's sympathy took the form of scolding.

"Miss Droylsden, what on earth are you doing out in this storm?"

"Getting wet," said Vera. "Now don't rant, there's a dear man! We ought not to be here, but here we are. We ought not to be wet, but wet we are. You have a kitchen fire, I suppose, and a dressing-gown for Evelyn? A coat and trousers will do for me—wish I could wear them always. Hurry up! Evelyn is shivering like a tramp in December, and I am quite beastly wet enough. Jove, is n't it coming down! The floor of Heaven has given way, I do believe!"

Frowning still, Oxonford led the way to his kitchen. The girls followed, leaving little rivers behind them: Evelyn truly wretched, Vera quite unconcerned. Miss Droylsden liked this masterful man, who seemed more massive than ever in his quaint cottage home. He filled the narrow passage and had to stoop to enter the kitchen, where he could barely stand upright under the oaken beams of the ceiling. Mrs. Hare, who waited on him, was preparing a savoury mess for his luncheon. The kitchen was neat and clean,

and the old woman had the unhurried, possessive air of the bachelor's servant. She looked rather sharply at the drenched girls.

"La, Mr. Oxonford!" she said. "Have you brought 'em in front-ways, and them as wet as swimming ducks! They 'll have left their track behind them, I 'll be bound! I must go find floor-flannels."

"Get as many floor-flannels as you like," he answered coolly; "but first stir your fire and find some dry things for these ladies. Miss Droylsden will tell you what she wants. This is Miss Droylsden, Mrs. Hare: the lady who is to marry Lord Mottisfont, you know."

"La!" repeated the woman, half mollified, but running her eyes sharply over Vera's figure. "Well, I 've heard about you, miss, and I 'm pleased to see you. 'T is well to know what 's before us when we can; though the ways of Providence is mysterious, for sure. A healthy-looking young lady, too! And this is Miss Manners; for sure it is. I did n't know you, at first, miss—you looked ser drowned like. Well, well! Dearie me! We 'll see what we can do."

The desire of Vera's heart was not gratified: she was not allowed to wear the breeches; but she did wear a very droll-looking dressing-gown of Oxonford's, none of Mrs. Hare's clothes being large enough for her. Clad in this garment, she strolled about the kitchen, vowing that she had

never sported anything half so comfortable. "And becoming too!" she exclaimed, looking at distorted likenesses of herself in the bright dish covers. Poor Evelyn looked and felt completely woe-begone in Mrs. Hare's Sunday gown of dingy, respectable black.

"Don't look so abject, child," said Vera. "Feel jolly, and you'll look jolly. Clothes are n't everything, you know, and what's the odds after all? There's only Mr. Oxonford to see us. Let's go and sit in the porch and watch the storm."

Oxonford's cottage was tucked away in the southern corner of the park. Behind it was a fragrant fir plantation, where the bracken, a hardy green now, would shrivel to brown in autumn through long-lingering flames of colour. To reach the cottage from the stretch of the park it was necessary to cross a little bridge over the stream that ran through Carshalton from the north-west to the south; and the small, well-tilled garden, thus pleasantly surrounded, showed a river-side wealth of simple flowers. Mignonette, nasturtium, sweet-peas, roses, bent humbly to the half-spent rain and sent up a grateful sweetness to the still faintly thundering heavens.

In a mood of unwonted contemplation Vera gazed at dripping park and garden, sniffed the ineffable scent of earth refreshed, and said: "Behold, it is very good!"

"Why is n't young Droylsden smoking?" said Oxonford's voice behind her.

Vera thrust her hands deep down in the pockets of the dressing-gown as she turned to him.

"Pitch that vile cigar of yours away, man, and draw the smell of Mother Earth up your nostrils!" said she. "I'm a child of nature, and not always an ungrateful child either."

"Child of nature generally means child of sin," answered he; but he held his cigar at arm's length and sniffed; and he also found earth's savour good.

Evelyn, abashed by the clothes she wore, had slipped away into the cottage.

"I think I'll come here and live with you," was young Droylsden's next remark.

"Heaven forbid!" cried Oxonford.

"Keep your hair on," said Vera coolly. "It's the place I'm gone on, though you please me well enough. I like the small cosiness of it, set in all this vastness"—her descriptive hands swept the park—"and then there is the water. The stream is muddy now, but it will be clear again to-morrow and still, very still, in the pools where the trout live. I have poked my nose into your rooms. You have a quaint taste in furniture, and these old leaded window-panes and high chimney-pieces are a poem. And Mrs. Hare feeds you well, I'll bet, and lets you be just untidy enough to be snug. You have all the

space and luxury of Carshalton at your feet and none of its worries. Give me a cottage in a park!"

"My good youth," said Oxonford whimsically, "what do you mean by *none of its worries*? Why, I run the whole place. Its tragedy is upon my shoulders," he added, on a deeper note.

"You are strong enough," said Vera unmoved. "I'm not going to bother to pity you."

There was a silence. The unspoken thought of Lady Carshalton lay between them.

"You were good to Carshalton," Oxonford said suddenly. "Why?"

"Why not?" said she.

"I asked why."

"Do you expect me to answer you?"

"I wish you would answer me."

"Why? You don't know what to think of me? Is that it?"

"That is it exactly," said he. "I'm sitting on the fence. It's not a comfortable seat for a man of my years and bulk."

"Oh, choose your own side for getting down," said she rudely. "I'm not for licking any man's boots, though you would be a good friend to have."

"You will want a friend," suggested he, "if you marry Cedric."

"I'm not afraid of suffering," Vera said, repeating her insistent inmost thought.

Oxonford bent his brows upon her.

"I don't think you are afraid. But shall I tell you what I think?"

"Speak on, Macduff."

"I think you are quite terribly at the mercy of those who suffer," he said. "You are strong, Miss Droylsden—abnormally so; but your sense of pity is abnormal, too. You are, I say, frightfully at the mercy of those who suffer; and that is the way suffering will come to you. I'm sitting on the fence, 't is true: don't know whether you are the very fittest or the most unfit woman on earth for this great position; and yet I like you well enough to give you this word of warning. Throw up that boy Cedric. He is not a man, you know—only a boy, or a devil; and, mark my words! he will give you a devil's time of it. Let him marry that poor little scarecrow who is in there shivering in Mrs. Hare's clothes. She'll spend her time and his money dressing up. He can't make her suffer so much. I have watched those boys from infancy, Miss Droylsden. They were inseparable, you know. I sometimes think they have only one complete nature between them. They might have gone to the dogs together, but they'll certainly go to the devil apart. The woman who marries Cedric must suffer more than I like to think of."

Again there was a silence.

Then Vera said: "Give her up, and I'll give him up."

Oxonford recoiled as from a blow. Vera laughed stubbornly.

"You can't do it, of course," she said. "Why not? Because you are sorry for her; and because she is Lady Carshalton and—just all that she is. Well, that's the way I love Cedric: not only because I'm sorry for him, but because he's just all that he is, even down to the beastly title and estates. And that, I take it," said Vera, looking squarely at Oxonford, "is just the last word of love."

CHAPTER XII

RIVALS BECOME FRIENDS

LATER on in the morning Oxonford sent a message to the Court to fetch dry clothes for the girls and to explain their absence; and, having given them a royal luncheon, drove them home in his dog-cart.

"He 's a good fellow, Oxonford!" said Vera to Evelyn; and vowed she was knocked flat by Evelyn's unexpected answer:

"He would suit you down to the ground, Vera. What a pity he is in love with Lady Carshalton! Why do you look like that? Every one knows it, though I'm not supposed to—by mother. And of course it is all right, you know—though so queer—because they are quite middle-aged."

"Queer, you call it, do you?"

"Why, what do you call it?" asked Evelyn, opening her dark eyes very wide.

"I call it an idyll," said Vera. "It ought not to be spoilt by gossip—or by marriage," she added, with decision.

"But if Lord Carshalton were to die?" said the persistent Evelyn.

"Oh, shut up!" answered Vera impatiently.

Ralph was hanging about on the terrace, waiting for Evelyn, in a very rough temper. He had gone through a disagreeable *tête-à-tête* luncheon with Cedric (Lady Carshalton remaining in her own room). Cedric dismissed the servants in order—Ralph fully believed—that he might the better take it out of his reputed junior. His self-possession brought Ralph to the pitch of impotent anger. Attempted sneers were met with calm; an innuendo or two, glancing at Vera, with contempt; a veiled threat of legal proceedings on the question of heirship with cold laughter. Ralph felt himself over-matched: the more so that the advice which he had secretly taken from a firm of solicitors in London was anything but encouraging. The cautious men of the law were not disposed readily to take up the case of a minor so peculiarly circumstanced as Ralph Mandeville. They hinted quite politely at his minority, helpless of the control of funds; pointed out the fact that Lord Carshalton was still living, yet unable to testify to the facts; mentioned the lamentable want of precedent in a case of this sort; and referred him to the family lawyers. This communication was crushed in Ralph's breast-pocket now. One phrase rankled more than the rest: *Lord Carshalton being unable to testify to the facts*. And if speech should return to him, how would Carshalton, the unscrupulous,

the devil-driven, testify? The mere sight of Ralph now agitated him so much that the boy was forbidden to go to him. Some strange root of hatred had sprung up, it seemed, in that blighted heart. And Ralph, who had brought Vera to Carshalton Court to be cast out, was likely to play the part of outcast himself. It seemed a walk-over for Vera. Cedric was laconically faithful to her; Carshalton fretted if she did not visit him daily; Nana had declared openly in favour of the terrible girl. Oxonford was still sitting (very comfortably) on the fence; and apparently Lady Carshalton sat there with him, but she did not really very much matter. And now Evelyn! Was she, too, going over to the enemy? Ralph questioned her minutely about this new freak of companionship with Vera, and was answered with a masterly mendacity. Evelyn, who was accustomed to dealing with Mrs. Manners, was not likely to be floored by Ralph Mandeville.

"Where is Vera Lroylsden now?" he asked abruptly at last.

"I suppose she has gone to Lord Carshalton. She said he would be wanting her. It's amazing, is n't it," said Evelyn, glancing up in a sidelong way at moody Ralph, "how he has taken to her? Nurse says he fidgets dreadfully if she stays away too long. And when she is there he just sits and watches her. I wonder why he likes her so much.

I suppose it 's because she is so strong and not a bit afraid of him."

Ralph made a sound of disgust and said, "Does she talk to him, I wonder?"

"I believe she does a little," answered Evelyn. "She said so, but I don't know what about. He cries and laughs so easily, you know, that I should be frightened to death. And lately he can move more and swear a little. I should not like to be sworn at! But Vera—Miss Droylsden, I mean—does n't mind a bit. She 's a queer girl, is n't she?" Evelyn asked very innocently.

"She 's a devil," said Ralph, with decision.

"Oh!" cried Evelyn with a little theatrical start.

"I beg your pardon; but, you know, she really is. She is not fit for you to associate with. You will not have anything to do with her, Evelyn, will you? You must not!"

"*Resist the devil and he will flee from you,*" quoted Evelyn, with suspicious facility. "But Vera Droylsden would never flee!"

Ralph glanced sharply at the girl, who maintained a puzzled innocence of manner.

"You don't like her?" he demanded.

"Oh no, not at all," answered Evelyn hastily. "How could I? We are so different, too, that how could she like me?"

The youthful lover fell into the trap and became sufficiently obvious. And Evelyn, dis-

liking him, yet flattered by his love-making, spent the afternoon with him quite amiably.

Ralph watched the girls rather sharply from this time, and saw that they hardly troubled to speak. Evelyn made long disappearances once or twice, but she said the hot weather tired her: she had been resting. Ralph rigged her up a hammock in a secluded corner that she might rest in his presence; and this she did once or twice to appease him. Miss Droylsden, she remarked incidentally, was very fully occupied, what with her attentions to Cedric and to Lord Carshalton.

But one day Ralph had a shock. Passing the open window of the library, he crossed a reek of smoke. Cedric and Vera, he thought contemptuously; yet some imp prompted him to stop and look in. Cedric was not there; but Vera Droylsden was, with Evelyn Manners.

"How do you like it, eh?" Vera was saying. "Don't feel sick, do you, Evelyn?"

"Sick? No!" in Evelyn's dainty tones. "It's just topping, Vera. So soothing!"

"Evelyn, I'm jolly glad you like me. Tell you what—I pretend to be independent of women. I've had to be. But if a woman treats me decently (which she hardly ever does) I'm true blue to her. I'll be true blue to you, Evelyn."

Her boyish paw was held out, and Evelyn's dainty little hand was laid in it. Beset by

rage, Ralph vaulted in the window. Evelyn, new to her rôle, shot her cigarette into the fireplace; then, turning to say soft words to Ralph, blew out a whole mouthful of smoke. Vera rolled back in her chair, helpless with laughter; Evelyn, open-mouthed with dismay for one moment only, did likewise. Ralph could find no words to express his disgust. He stalked out of the room.

"Vera," said the model of propriety, when she could speak again, "is n't it jolly to be naughty?"

"I never think whether I'm naughty or good," said Miss Droylsden superbly. "Could n't be worried to be always looking inside myself. Rather narrowing, don't you think? I just do the things that come along, don't you know!"

"Ralph's face!" cried Evelyn; and laughed again till the tears came; then pulled herself suddenly up to say:

"I hope he won't tell mother!"

"Is smoking cigarettes the eighth deadly sin?" asked Vera.

"Well, mother does n't like it. Perhaps if some one very smart or titled had taught me, she would n't mind. But, you, Vera! She says you are a stable-boy, masquerading in girl's clothes. She would take me away for certain. Vera, I could not bear to go now when I'm getting such friends with you. I have never had a real friend before. The girls at school were such

sticks; and at home I'm always *behaving* under mother's eye. That is why, partly, I want to be married. It would mean freedom."

"Would it?" exclaimed Vera. "With Ralph? My good child, don't you make any mistake. Life is n't ever going to be one long dream. It's much more likely to turn into a nightmare. Keep awake, therefore. That's my advice to you. I'll not charge for it."

"I think one might have chronic nightmare here," said Evelyn pensively. "Yet Carshalton Court is very attractive, apart from the money. There's a black fate over the place; and the plot seems to be thickening while you wait. I tell you, Vera, when I come along the gallery to your room at night I feel things there." (She dropped her voice.) "I don't know what sort of things; but mysterious, evasive, just not tangible. They make me shiver delightfully. They may be born only of space and darkness, but I don't think it. There's an awful air of mystery in the house, and it deepens at sundown. There are secrets, wrongs, that we don't know of, Vera, I'm sure there are."

"Quite likely," said Vera stolidly. "But I haven't met any one roaming at night that I couldn't prod hard with a walking-stick. I thought I did one night, but it turned out to be that queer little kitchen-maid, wandering on forbidden ground. I hurt her, I believe, but she

almost died of gratitude because I told her to make quick tracks for her attic and I'd not let on. It was awfully stupid of me to swish at her. I might have noticed her fat little shape. Ghosts are n't ever fat, are they, Eve? They're diaphanous; they float,—more like Lady Carshalton."

"I was n't thinking only of ghosts," said Evelyn, "though of course Carshalton has legends. I was thinking, Vera,—there's something I'm dying to say to you. Dare I?"

"Rather! Speak up, little girl. What is it?"

"Well, it is this. In novels—they're silly, perhaps, but they're built on life; and I've heard it said that the parts which seem most improbable are the truest. Cedric's leg—oh, Vera, forgive me!"

"Go on," said Vera shortly.

"Well, in novels, you know— Oh, Vera, it is all such a mystery. Why does Nana get so cross if it is mentioned? Of course she does n't like me to mention family matters; but that is not all, I am sure. Do you know what I think?"

"I'm waiting to know. Hurry up!"

"Well, in novels, you know— Vera, do you think Ralph can have done it?"

"Good Lord!" cried Vera. "Good Lord!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT IDEA

THUS had foolish, romantic Evelyn, led by nothing less than reason, hit upon a truth which had been successfully hidden for fourteen years. This was not really so very remarkable; for even if five-year-old Ralph had not done the fell deed, Evelyn, who revelled in "situations," would have persuaded herself that he had. It was far more singular that Vera should have taken up what Evelyn now called The Great Idea. But, as Vera vulgarly phrased it, she was knocked flat. It was a lightning stroke of truth; she was, for the moment, blinded to all but the great flash that had convinced her.

Coming to her senses a little, she argued against this foolishness; and was re-convinced less by Evelyn's tenacity than by an instinctive recognition of the truth thus accidentally found. Vera was proving the, as yet, unscientised force of telepathy. In a tensely charged atmosphere, with temperaments high-strung by circumstance, human beings can hardly so much as think of a secret and hope to keep it intact. So Vera,

having scouted Evelyn's Great Idea, returned to it, wondering; and set her intellect to work on means of proving it.

"If this is the truth, who knows it?" she said. "Nana, of course, since she was nurse to the twins. Lord Carshalton, equally of course, unless they lied to him; for he could never have been a man backward in questioning. Lady Carshalton must know it, and Mr. Oxonford, and perhaps Hawkins and Jefferson. There it ends. None of the other servants have been long in the family, and if outsiders had been told, Ralph would have known it too."

"Perhaps he does know it," suggested Evelyn. Vera's face fell.

"That would be a sell for us," she said, "for I begin to want the whip-hand of Master Ralph."

She thought for a moment, then said cheerfully:

"Oh no, he does n't know it. Ralph is a traitor, I own; but I don't think he is quite so bad as that. Even he, knowing that he had done it, could not have taunted Cedric with his lameness when——"

"When what, Vera? Why do you stop so suddenly?"

"I wonder if I dare tell you."

"Tell me what?" cried Evelyn breathlessly.

"Do go on, I'm dying to know."

"And next you'd be dying to blab it all round the county."

"Vera, not if I promised you!"

"But you 're rather a little liar, Eve; you know you are."

"Not to you!" cried the girl. "I 'd not lie to you. You have been too decent to me."

And the subtle brown eyes looked quite sincerely into Vera's odd green ones.

"You could n't," asked Vera, "imagine yourself my rival, wanting to tear things away from me?"

"No, no!" cried Evelyn. "I 'm true to you, Vera—true blue, as you said; and I hate Ralph now, because he hates me. I want to punish him; indeed I do."

"I begin to hate Ralph too," said Vera slowly. "What is he doing to Cedric? Evelyn, Cedric is fading before our very eyes. I don't think I want to punish Ralph. I 'm not a school-master and would rather turn my back on cubs than birch them any day; but I want the whip-hand of him that I may defend Cedric from him, if necessary. Here comes Cedric—and in a rage too! What is it, old man?"

"It 's that cur, Ralph," said Cedric angrily. "He has been daring to threaten me about that beastly toss. He can't pull anything off with the lawyers he has written to, and now he threatens to go to a firm of sharpers in London. Lawyers they call themselves, but they 're well known for their dirty practice. He 'll drag our name through

the mud—and there's no lack of it, thanks to the poor governor—rather than give up his chance of the title!"

Evelyn gave a small scream of excitement.

"His chance of the title?" she cried shrilly. "Are you not Ralph's twin after all, then, Cedric? How strange and romantic it all is!"

Cedric, who had been too angry to notice Evelyn's presence in the library, turned upon her now, his heat fallen to cold fury. She shrank from him in terror, clinging to Vera's arm.

"Easy on," said Vera. "This is a friend, Cedric."

"A friend, is it?" sneered Cedric savagely. "I thought it was a poor little rat afraid of a shaking. It's Ralph's rat, too. Don't trust her, Vera. She'll let you down; nothing surer."

"I would not; I never would," sobbed Evelyn. "If it were only you, I might, because you are so horrid and so cruel; but not Vera, never Vera!"

Cedric's fantastic sense of humour changed anger to contemptuous kindness.

"Look here," he said, "I don't say that I trust you, for you are what you are, and you can't help it; but I'll go so far as to say that I believe you mean well to Vera at this minute. But you meant well by Ralph until two or three days ago. You have no staying power. There, whatever you do, don't cry! You don't know what it makes you look like!"

His smile as Evelyn hastily dried her eyes was a jeer which Evelyn would not soon forget. He considered her attentively for a minute.

"I was a fool to let out," he said. "*Anger is a short madness*, as the Latin grammar hath it. Now the question is, Vera, how much does this foolish girl think that she knows?"

"I tell you she's a friend," said Vera shortly. "Don't turn your friends into foes, Cedric. It's pure folly."

"Best tell her the truth," said Cedric then. "She'll not rest until she hears it, and she may as well hear it from us as from Ralph. You can tell her, Vera. And then we shall see," he added threateningly, "what a girl's sense of honour is."

"Yes, you will see!" cried Evelyn proudly, her arm still linked in Vera's.

The romance of the story appealed to her. She forgot her tears and was in a delicious excitement, eager for Cedric to be gone that she might talk it over with Vera in the added light of her own Great Idea. Moreover she pictured herself as something of a heroine for siding against Ralph, who might, if successful, raise her to the peerage; and this heroic part was so pleasant that she would not admit how clearly she felt Ralph's chance of success to be infinitesimal. Evelyn was a young girl, therefore romantic; but she could not be the daughter of Mrs. Manners without being practical too. Ralph was yet a minor;

there was absolutely no evidence to prove the heir; and Cedric had, in all these years, established a right-of-way to the estate and title. He himself put this forcibly, confident that no judge would sum up against him, that no arbitrator would oust him; and the force of his cold personality drove the words home.

"Ralph would give himself away in the witness box. You would have the best of it there," said Evelyn meditatively; and Cedric was surprised and flattered by her perspicacity. The arrogant boy showed his inexperience in writing women down dolls and fools, with the one bright exception of Vera Droylsden. Evelyn smiled a fine little smile at his patronising approval. For the moment the two were almost friends. But Evelyn sighed with relief when he left her with Vera.

"Now we can talk," she said. "Cedric thinks he is very clever, but he does not know everything."

And they talked about The Great Idea until it became a living fact in their minds. The creeds of the world have been established in this simple way, and will be so established again.

Nana was chosen as the point of attack, and Vera was to attack her. Miss Droylsden often went to see her in the room which had been the boys' day-nursery. Here Nana sat the greater part of her time, doing little jobs of sewing or mending; and here, often, Lady Carshalton came

to talk over her troubles. The old woman's bedroom opened out of the day-nursery; for she had her little suite of rooms like an honoured guest, and proved her rare calibre by never for one moment forgetting that she was a servant of the great House she loved. Nana's eyesight was good; her feverish way of working was temperamental, explaining her many wrinkles and the abnormal brightness of her eyes, which flamed out of her ancient face, when she looked up, like a sudden fire leaping, wind-fanned, out of ashes. Nana's own pet cat sat in the sun on the broad window-seat, blinking inscrutably and licking itself quickly now and again, in a sudden scruple of cleanliness. It got up and arched its back and stretched itself when Vera strolled casually into the room, and she stroked it and said:

"Not a bad little beast, you 're not! Animals are n't half the bother of human beings. Are they, Nana?"

"What 's bothering you, Miss Droylsden?" the old woman asked, with her shrewd, flashing glance.

"Oh, nothing," Vera answered indifferently. "But what I mean is that animals are such philosophers. They go straight on, don't you know. They get their sleep and their meals and their exercise; and they think a lot, but say nothing. And when they 're ill they die straight away. They 're cuter than we humans after all is said and done."

"Something is bothering you, miss," Nana insisted.

"Well," said Vera, with a sudden curious intensifying of her green eyes, "I'll tell the truth. I want to know who lamed Cedric, Nana."

Nana was taken off her guard. For one moment her eyes flickered and wandered; for one moment only. Then she put her hand to her heart, as if something hurt her there, and said:

"You have asked a cruel question, Miss Droylsden, and you're not the body to rest content unanswered. I'll tell you the gospel truth and will try to forgive you for touching an old wound that's never ceased to ache. 'T was I did it: I, that loved the poor wee lamb! I dropped him, I did! Woe is me, but I dropped him!"

"Oh, Nana, forgive me!" cried the girl. "Poor Nana! I'm an awful, awful brute to have made you tell me! You must try to forgive me."

"'T is I must pray for forgiveness, Miss Droylsden," the woman said solemnly.

Nana could lie well when she liked.

CHAPTER XIV

NANA THE PROPHETESS

MRS. MANNERS called that afternoon and suggested taking her daughter home: Evelyn must not be allowed quite to wear Lady Carshalton out.

"She does not wear me out," said Lady Carshalton. "The fact is that I see very little of these young people. But of course I know where they are all the time," she added quickly, mindful of her duties as chaperon. "Tennis and riding and that sort of thing. A groom goes with Evelyn and Ralph, or sometimes Mr. Oxonford."

"Miss Droylsden does not ride?"

"She does not care to learn."

"Of course she has not been accustomed to it. I quite understand that. And is Miss Droylsden staying on?"

"Cedric says so," answered Lady Carshalton vaguely. "Indeed I have asked her to stay, and if dear Evelyn would stay, too, I should be delighted. It must be terribly dull for her, but it is quite impossible, as you know, for me to entertain."

Lady Carshalton seemed entirely to have forgotten the original purpose of Evelyn's presence at Carshalton Court. Mrs. Manners could have shaken her with satisfaction, but had to content herself with saying rather maliciously:

"Of course Evelyn simply loves staying here; and she is such a good girl. Nothing, I know, would induce her to enter into any friendship of which I might disapprove."

"I think my son will, in all probability, marry Miss Droylsden," said Lady Carshalton, with a gentle *hauteur*. "It is possible that we may have been mistaken in our judgment of her."

Mrs. Manners, thinking of Ralph, who still remained, and of her four dowerless daughters, schooled herself to say:

"I should be delighted to be able to think so, dear Lady Carshalton. If you are satisfied, and Mr. Oxonford also, who is so fastidious, I am sure all must be for the best. Who was it that said that all was for the best in this best of all possible worlds? I don't quite remember; but some great man, I am sure. And now, may I find dear Evelyn for a few minutes before I run away? I think I see her on the tennis lawns."

Mrs. Manners did see dear Evelyn on the tennis lawns. She also saw Vera Droylsden, who was giving a slashing service and calling out:

"Stand well back to 'em, Eve. They 're not

so bad as they look. Pick 'em up smartly. That 's the way! Well played, indeed!"

"Evelyn," said Mrs. Manners, in a voice of ice, bearing down upon the two girls.

"You have not come to take me away?" cried Evelyn, half frightened, half rebellious.

"Lady Carshalton has kindly invited you to stay on for a time," answered Mrs. Manners, bowing with her eyelids to Vera. "But I wish to speak to you alone for a few minutes. Miss Droylsden will doubtless excuse you."

"Don't mind me," said Vera coolly. "I 'm never dull so long as I 've a cig to smoke and my good little dog to talk to."

"You are a most fortunate young woman," said Mrs. Manners.

Vera allowed her eyes to wander over the great, beautiful place surrounding them before meeting the lady's patronising stare.

"You bet!" she said; and Mrs. Manners swished away in a wrathful rustle of silken skirts.

"What an offensive young woman!" said Mrs. Manners. "What a very offensive young woman!"

"Why do you call her 'a young woman'?" said Evelyn fractiously. "It sounds so dreadful. Vera is n't a tramp, you know. She 's going to be Lady Mottisfont and, some day, Countess of Carshalton."

"You are a very ungrateful girl," cried Mrs.

Manners angrily, "and a very foolish one. I have half ruined myself to give you this chance, and you have let it slip through your fingers."

"Oh," said Evelyn wearily, "we had all that over last time. It seems to me far more vulgar than anything Vera Droylsden says or does. I tell you, mother, it was quite hopeless from the beginning. Cedric loves Vera as much as he can love any one. That is to say, he is at ease with her. You can't fight love. I was a month too late, and one may as well come upon the scene a century too late as a month, where love is concerned. How do I know? Does n't every woman want to be loved? That teaches her," said Evelyn rather bitterly.

Mrs. Manners glanced quickly at her daughter.

"You are not a woman," she replied. "You are a most foolish, romantic child. A woman knows that she must marry as well as possible, both for her own sake and for the sake of her family."

"I know," said Evelyn. "I've got to be sold, but Cedric won't buy me. He's not taking any. There remains Ralph. Am I to stay on and try to catch Ralph?"

Mrs. Manners held up hands of horror.

"You have been making friends with the Droylsden girl," she cried. "It is very evident from the vulgarity of your language. It shocks and frightens me. *Not taking any! To catch*

Ralph! How crude and vulgar! And her way of speaking to you—oh yes, I heard! You must check this familiarity at once. I will have my daughter enter into no such friendship. Vera Droylsden is not of our world. She is a designing interloper."

"She will be Cedric's wife," repeated Evelyn doggedly. "If I am to marry Ralph, am I to be shut out of Carshalton Court? How shortsighted that is!"

Mrs. Manners bit her lip in vexation. Evelyn presented a surprisingly practical view of the situation.

"If I could think you were merely civil to her from motives of diplomacy," Mrs. Manners said at last, "I should feel that after all you were only doing your duty. But—it is a sad thing to have to say—I cannot quite trust you, Evelyn. I do not know why it is so, when you have been so excellently well brought up. This is one of the trials of motherhood. Now can you look me in the face and tell me that you have not made friends with Vera Droylsden?"

"Yes, I could," said Evelyn. "I could quite easily say those words. I have been well brought up, you see, mother."

Mrs. Manners had never before been defied by the dainty little model of propriety she had moulded from infancy. She was quite at a loss and would have liked to punish Evelyn by taking

her home in disgrace; but, as she put it, she knew her duty as a mother: mothers must sacrifice themselves.

"I do not profess to understand you, Evelyn," she said; "but I hope you clearly understand my meaning. If you stay on here, you must, perhaps, be just civil to Vera Droylsden; but remember what is expected of you. Ralph detests her. You are not to ruin your chances by any undignified folly."

"That 's all right," said Evelyn flippantly. "Of course Ralph hates Vera, but he will come to me whenever I lift my little finger. He is moody and morose, but he comes. He misses Cedric frightfully, and he must have some one; and that some one is me. Don't fret about that, mother. But he will make a very cross husband."

"My dearest child," cried Mrs. Manners, stooping to kiss her daughter, "I can see that you will follow my wishes."

"You know I don't care for Ralph, mother?" said Evelyn, looking up rather wistfully. "In fact I dislike him."

"Love will come," replied her mother, "love will come. I did not greatly care for your dear father when I married him, yet I am sure we are a model couple now. He falls in with all my views."

"I wish it were Mr. Oxonford," said the minx Evelyn, giving one of her sidelong glances. "He

is so strong and true and distinguished-looking: like a knight of old. I should quite like to be an old man's darling. Has Mr. Oxonford much money, mother? I wish he were not in love with Lady Carshalton."

"In love with Lady Carshalton!" repeated Mrs. Manners sharply. "Don't let me hear of any such improper nonsense. I do not know where you can have gathered such an idea. But," she added, with her usual transparent diplomacy, "I happen to know enough of Mr. Oxonford's history to be quite sure that he is not for you."

"No, he is not for me," agreed Evelyn, with her fine little smile.

They had wandered through the shrubberies and had come back by devious ways to the sunny tennis courts. Vera was throwing balls in the air with a tremendous shoulder action; and Jack was barking furiously and darting after them as they fell. Miss Droylsden's attitudes in playing this schoolboy game were more forcible than elegant; and Mrs. Manners, who was convinced that the girl was doing it to annoy, could not be expected to fall into a rapture of wonder at the height and straightness of the throws. Indeed she was a little consoled by what she considered the utter foolishness of Evelyn's exclamation, "I'd give worlds to be able to do that!" Evelyn, she argued, was, after all, only shamming admiration for this terrible Vera, just to annoy, or,

perhaps, for some other futile, young-girlish reason. The lady noticed, too, that Miss Droylsden ceased her mannish sport when Lady Carshalton appeared on the terrace above the courts; and this was pleasant confirmation of one of her pet theories, "All girls are deceitful."

"Evelyn is charmed with your kindness in asking her to stay longer," she said to Lady Carshalton. "And now I must really run away. Evelyn, pray go and get a shadier hat. You have not Miss Droylsden's complexion of milk and wild roses, so you must take all the more care of what you have. Run at once, dearest child. Good-bye, dear Lady Carshalton. Good-bye, Miss Droylsden."

Vera, left alone, invoked patriarchs, prophets, saints, and other experienced persons for the reason of this compliment, and relieved her feelings by giving each of the tennis balls one last mighty upward smite.

When the girls had taken up their game again Lady Carshalton stood on the terrace, watching them awhile. Ralph and Cedric strolled up from opposite directions and watched the game too. Evelyn's half-tired, half-wistful voice was heard saying, "Oh, would n't a four set be jolly!" But, apart from Cedric's infirmity, this was apparently impossible in the existing relations between the brothers. Ralph's angry glance raked Cedric from head to foot for a moment;

Cedric's cold gaze never wavered in Ralph's direction.

Lady Carshalton sighed patiently. She was completely puzzled by all that was happening around her. The atmosphere of Carshalton seemed to be thick with unanswered questions, and the threads of fate in a hopeless, increasing tangle. What was the meaning of the apparently sudden friendship between Vera and Evelyn? It was absurd, she thought, to be anxious about the love-affairs of a boy of nineteen; but this woman had passed through a furnace of discipline and would have welcomed any sort of decent certainty for the future of her wayward husband's wayward sons. What might they not do of the terrible, the unexpected? She had come to regard Vera Droylsden with a sense of relief; but this she would not own even to Nana, for a very feminine reason. Lord Carshalton's strange, pathetic dependence upon the girl was a reproach to his wife's tender conscience. She said to herself, "A strong woman who had loved him could have saved him"; and herself answered with mournful pride, "I, even I, have endured all things at his hands; but he turns to this stranger!" Oh, why, why had he turned to Vera Droylsden?

But the great unanswerable question concerned the quarrel between the hitherto inseparable twins. Was it only on account of Vera Droylsden,

or could they, by any chance, have heard of the affair of the toss? Yet how was that possible? Never through Nana, the incorruptible; and Carshalton, the corruptible, the erratic, was speechless: incapable of vagaries. A hundred times Lady Carshalton answered, "Impossible," to her own question; yet found herself asking it again and again. Oxonford might have helped her with advice, but he was in ignorance of the doubtful heirship. Often and unspeakably she had longed to tell him the secret, but always honour forbade. Honour she called the hindering scruple, but it was something warmer than honour to a woman's mind: it was the delicately guarded ideal of their unconfessed devotion. Weak in all else, Lady Carshalton was strong to guard the resolution that this should remain unmarred by anything mean or contemptible. But Nana—she could always tell Nana! She drifted away to her now.

"Nana," she said, "I think and think until the world swims and reels around me. What has come to my boys? Daily their hatred grows. It is very terrible. What can have come to my boys?"

The old woman shook her head.

"Ask them, my lady."

"Nana, I cannot, I dare not. And they would not answer me. You know they would not."

"'T would be a forlorn hope," Nana admitted; "yet many such has led on to victory before now,

I've heard tell. But you might as well smite a rock for water as think that Lord Mottisfont will tell you what is in his heart. This unbelieving world has gone far past the day of miracles, and that miracle will not happen. Mr. Ralph is hotter both in love and hatred. Try him, my lady."

"Then I must ask him in the presence of Cedric," Lady Carshalton said. "I could not do it otherwise. They were such friends, Nana,—one heart between them; and I feel that Ralph has played traitor once—Mr. Oxonford pointed it out to me—and I, in my weakness, encouraged him. And who knows to what awful deed my interference might lead? I was never fit to be the mother of such wayward sons," said the poor lady. "If only my little girl had lived!"

"If only," repeated Nana firmly. "I could n't count up the 'if onlys' of my life. It's clear made up of 'em; and yet I live on, my lady, and am happy when I am near you. It don't do to think of the past. It's like a blight to do that, it is. And there may be a future for us on earth, or there may not. The Lord's hand smites sudden. The present is all we have got for certain. We must do the best we can with that, my lady."

Lady Carshalton sighed and said:

"You are a dear good soul, Nana. What should I do without you? I give thanks nightly for

you—and sometimes for Mr. Oxonford,” she added, very low.

“I should have told Mr. Oxonford long ago about that wicked tossing-up, if I had had my way,” Nana said. “Honour? Pooh! He ought to have known. But there, my dear lady, you are as you are, and I would not have you otherwise. As to the boys, I’m in sheer black darkness about ’em myself, that I am. I’ve chastised them with my tongue for their bad behaviour, and not a word can I get from ’em beyond, ‘Nana, you’re a good old sort.’ For all the world like their father. And I’ve come round, careful-like, to the tossing-up; but, look as sharp as I might, I couldn’t read their thoughts. How they could get to know about it either, beats me. But things are in the wind sometimes, I do believe.”

“If they know, Miss Droylsden must know. Would she not tell you? Would honour forbid, do you think?” asked Lady Carshalton curiously, thinking of Oxonford.

“I think it would,” Nana replied. “Unless in some way the telling could do Lord Mottisfont good; and then nothing would hold her.”

“Nana, does she really love my poor boy?”

“My lady,” said the woman, laying her wrinkled hand on Lady Carshalton’s shoulder, “don’t you fret. Yes, she loves him; and, oh, my dear lady, she’s worthy of him, for all the strange tongue

that 's in her. She 's got a tender heart under her rough ways and a man's gentleness with that poor, smitten sinner in there. And I have cause myself to know her kindness and her simplicity."

Nana smiled rather a pitying smile, thinking of her so successful lie to Vera.

"Sure, 't will all come right in the end, my lady," she said after a pause. "Them above would never let your life be all wasted in unhappiness. Sure, it must all come right in the end."

But when Lady Carshalton was gone, comforted like a child for a time, Nana sat and thought over the situation and saw no possible happy ending. True, that poor smitten sinner, as she called Carshalton, was daily improving in physical condition. Very soon, the doctor thought, he would be able to sit up in an invalid chair. And he had spoken several times lately: incoherent nonsense syllables, pathetically, angrily, repeated, with a very coherent oath rapped out once or twice when the nurse made no polite pretence of understanding him.

"Thanks, damn you!" he had said to Nana only that morning when she handed him his handkerchief fallen from the bed; and had given a grim smile when she answered, "That 's a good hearing, my lord."

But Carshalton, recovered, or partially recovered, would be Carshalton still; bringing

it was impossible to tell what fresh perversions of his maimed intellect to complicate the situation. The humanity in Nana had rejoiced to hear him thank and curse her again; the wisdom in her knew that it boded no good to her dearest lady.

From that dearest lady she had bravely hidden her fears, but Nana woke often in the hours of darkness with terror gripping at her heart. Some final fatality was looming over the great house, she said to herself; and, seeking to determine it, as foolish mortals will, was more than once haunted until cock-crow by the tapestried presentment on the grand staircase of Cain slaying Abel.

CHAPTER XV

FAMILY LEGENDS

VERA, who had the habit of speaking the truth, had unhesitatingly accepted Nana's lie, and had crushed down Evelyn's scepticism on the point.

"Rubbish!" said Vera. "Of course she was speaking the truth. Why, she looked broken-hearted. I never felt such a brute in my life, never! Besides, what motive could she have?"

"I can scent the motive," said Evelyn tragically. "Nana would not want to add fuel to the flames."

"Oh well, you did not hear or see her. You take my word for it. The Great Idea is squashed, knocked on the head, exploded, pulverised—anything you like—but dead as an Egyptian mummy. It's a bore, of course, but what's the good of wailing? Next, please."

And the next thing was, to Vera, the unexpected. Enlightened by the wily Evelyn, she became aware that Nana was furtively on the watch. The old woman had developed a habit of pouncing on the two girls when they were

together, always with a cat-like silence of tread, invariably with some plausible excuse for her appearance. Soon Evelyn, who was rather well used to being spied upon, began to lead her a dance. She would break off suddenly in the middle of a sentence to begin a fresh subject, with an admirable pretence of ease that was highly suggestive of covert scheming. And once or twice, when Nana had entered Miss Droylsden's room at night very close upon a perfunctory knocking, Evelyn held up a slim finger and said, "Hush, Vera!" quite audibly; then vanished, with the thrilling murmur, "*À minuit; à l'heure des revenants!*"

"What is that gibberish Miss Manners is so fond of?" asked Nana fretfully. "She is not a nice young lady, Miss Droylsden, dear. Don't you be led astray by her arts."

"Don't you be a suspicious old Nana," replied Vera carelessly; and was prepared by the uneasy look that crossed Nana's face for Evelyn's declaration, "Say what you like, Vera, I touched the spot. Ralph did it. Nana is sitting uneasily on her lie. She has hatched it too carefully and has addled it. Ralph lamed Cedric, I tell you. I feel it in my bones. Don't you, Vera?"

Behold, then, The Great Idea flourishing, and Evelyn in her element.

"We must get evidence of the truth," said she, "and then surprise it out of Nana. She

might try to lie again even then, but she would do it badly. Lord Carshalton must know. Vera, Lord Carshalton knows, of course."

"I don't think I shall ask the poor old boy," said Vera slowly. "It seems playing it rather low down when he's so helpless. Besides, he might get in an awful rage or even die of it."

"Nonsense," said Evelyn petulantly. "Why, he likes you most awfully. You have only to hint that you don't like Ralph——"

"He's got his knife into Ralph already," interrupted Vera. "Can't bear the sight of him."

"Well, then, it's child's play. You go to him and say, 'Who lamed Cedric? Was it Ralph?' And he will nod—he can quite easily nod, can't he? And it's all done, and Nana in our net."

"That's not good enough," said Vera contemptuously. "Of course he would nod if I wanted him to, whether it was the truth or not. That's not half good enough: we want the real truth. No, to convince me he would have to speak it, and not only to speak it, but to think he was doing it of his own free will. And I don't know that I shall try to make him. No low-down play for me."

"Very well," said Evelyn, in a pet, "if you are going to snub me, I suppose I had better encourage Ralph to get the title and then marry him. Would that be fairer play?"

But Vera would not quarrel.

"Stow it!" she said. "We're not a couple of cats to begin clawing. Of course I know how jolly well you've played up. But you must let me think it out. I can't be hurried."

It was fate that hurried her after all. That very afternoon, sitting with Carshalton, she was appalled by his persistent, pathetic attempts to frame words with his lips.

"I wonder what you want to say," she cried at last; and put pencil and paper into his hand. "Could you write it? Try."

He could not. The syllables he wrote made nonsense words.

"It may be Chinese or Polynesian," she said. "It is n't English. Oh, I wish I were not such a duffer! Do you want anything in this room? If so point to it."

He pointed to her.

"But, my dear old boy, I'm here. What on earth can you mean?"

He stamped his left foot with vexation—he was sitting in his chair now—and pointed still more insistently. A bright idea struck Vera.

"You want to know something about me?"

He nodded.

"Who I am, perhaps? Why I am here?"

Again he nodded, well pleased.

"I'm just a nobody," she said, looking at him very steadily. "That's the fact of it. Just a

middle-class girl, with a dear old boy for a father who has more culture in his little finger than all you Mandevilles put together. Oh yes, he has! You're an ignorant lot, you people! You think you can stand on the top of the world without the staff of knowledge to hold you up. An old trump, my father is, too. Loves me, and I love him. Haven't you heard them call me Miss Droylsden?"

He signed impatiently to her to go on.

"You know the name of Arthur Bernard Droylsden? Most people do. The best coach in England. You sent Cedric to him to be crammed. I see you remember that. Now keep calm and I'll tell you more. But first, are we pals?"

He gave his frail left hand, and she held it as she went on.

"I love your son Cedric," she said very earnestly. "I'm going to marry him. Now draw your hand away, if you are disgusted; but remember that if you do, you'll half break my heart."

He did not draw his hand away; he pressed hers quite strongly, looking excited and eager.

"Now that's enough for to-day," she said. "Make your mind easy. You're going to talk again all right soon, and then we'll discuss it all. Don't you fret; I'm not going to hurry Cedric up. I know he's only a boy; and he must go to Oxford first and get his degree like a man."

Carshalton frowned at this. The germ of an idea was in his mind: a little seed that would persist and grow and bear strange fruit some day. Vera was leaving him when he said suddenly, "Cedric."

"You want Cedric? I'll soon find him for you."

"You, too," he said quite clearly; yet was speechless when she returned with Cedric. He looked at his heir and shook his head mournfully and pointed to Vera, with pathetic, ineffectual efforts to speak; and—worst of all—those terrible tears were threatening.

"I'll be good to her; I swear I will," said Cedric, more touched than he liked to own. "Is that what you mean?"

It was not all he meant. There was something more; but what it was they could not guess. Vera would not let Carshalton cry. She spoke to him strongly, compellingly.

"Fretting won't do the trick," she said; "but patience may. I'll come and see you often; and one of these good days you'll be able to tell me what you want, and then it will be all right. Now you must be good and quiet before I ring for nurse, or I shall not be allowed to come and see you."

It was Nana who answered the bell. Nana, it seemed, was on the watch all round. Vera felt triumph rather than resentment, for here was confirmation of The Great Idea.

"What a game!" she said aloud. "What a game!"

"I don't see much game in it all," Cedric said moodily. "Vera, when I look at the poor old governor I sometimes think I ought not to have dragged you into all this mess. Look at me, too! What a rotten lot we are!"

"Stuff and rubbish!" said Vera.

"There's a curse upon us," the young fellow went on. "For generations no head of the house has made a happy marriage. Has n't Nana told you the family legends? The wife of the fifth earl took refuge in a convent, because Carshalton Court seemed to her a hell upon earth. She's the lady in the Long Gallery, with the Spanish head-dress and the weird eyes. Some fellow painted her whose art was n't limited to a type; and the terror of life is in her face. The wife of the fourth earl went mad, and they shut her up in the east wing. Some people say she is there still. Often a door bangs at night when no living soul is about."

"I've heard it," said Vera.

"The pretty Lely lady on the staircase," went on Cedric, "who looks as though she could do nothing but smirk, drowned herself in the lake in the park, because her husband killed her lover in a duel. The dainty little Romney countess faded away and died before she was twenty-four; leaving an heir, luckily, for her successor was the

cook. The cook's branch would inherit, if our line failed. The governor hates them like mad. I think he 'd willingly go to hell to keep them out of the succession. There was one earl who was devoted to his wife; but he was killed in the Civil Wars, fighting for his king. That Countess of Carshalton never married again. She lived till she was ninety; there are six portraits of her. She kept her ideal, you see; Death did that for her. I can't remember half of the tales about the portraits, but Nana knows them all and is proud of them. She got them from the old house-keeper, Mrs. Mellor, who died soon after my mother came here. I know my grandfather was a miserable old curmudgeon who married an heiress and then almost starved her. He read prayers to her when what she wanted was a really well-cooked dinner. That 's why the estate is in such good order now: the old curmudgeon left such piles of money. The governor had the sense to make Oxonford his agent, and Oxonford did the thing well. The governor always had some sense under his wildness; and there was heaps of spare cash for him to go to the devil with. But we 're a bad lot, Vera. Are n't you afraid of us?"

"I shall try to break the spell," she answered. "There never was a Countess of Carshalton the least bit like me. I shall try to break the spell."

She paused, then added:

"I could not have borne a lower fate than this."

Cedric looked at her curiously.

"You never rant about the place," he said. "You're such a cool hand. But you care?"

"Yes, I care," she said, "and I know how much you care. You are Carshalton and Carshalton is you. It would break your heart to see it go to the cook's branch."

"Or to Ralph," said Cedric. "It shall not go to Ralph."

They had wandered through the park by moss-grown ways and ferny hollows, past the lake where the wild ducks were and the poor little countess had drowned herself; and had come, by way of the eastern gate, to the little Norman church, where, Sunday after Sunday, Lady Carshalton prayed in the great square pew, the villagers watching for a sight of my lady as she stood up for the hymns. It was Saturday morning, and the church was open for cleaning. Standing by the monument of a crusading Carshalton, Cedric repeated:

"It shall not go to Ralph."

"How you hate him!" said Vera, on a sudden impulse. "Oh, Cedric, if you were ever to turn against me!"

"I could never hate you as I hate Ralph," he declared; and the thought shot through her that the measure of love is the measure of possible

hate. "He has never loved me as he loved Ralph."

What she said aloud was, "I never liked Ralph: he's not my sort. But I don't want to be too hard on him. He has his point of view, of course."

"It's the point of view of a traitor," said Cedric curtly, with his hand on the crossed legs of the fighting Mandeville.

Then he saw the charwoman peering at him over the top of a pew, and said lightly:

"Look at all those quaint little beggars kneeling one behind the other, getting smaller and smaller. Children of the second earl. Jove! he was a domestic man. He'll be the redeemer of the family honour, no doubt!"

They made a circuit of the village and re-entered the park by the southern gate. Cedric's mood of unusual confidence made the walk memorable. Unwilling to go into the house, Vera led the way to the stables. There a ladder, placed against the loft, tempted her. She was like a boy for trees and ladders.

"Well, what is up there?" called Cedric from below. "Any family skeletons?"

"All kinds of wattle," shouted Vera, "and dust enough for a resurrection. Look out! I'm coming down."

Among the rubbish was a big broken rocking-horse. Quick-witted Vera had not mentioned it to Cedric. It had, doubtless, been put away

because a lamed little boy, who could no longer ride it, must not be tantalised by the sight of his twin upon it. But why was it broken?

Vera asked Nana this; and Nana disclaimed all acquaintance with rocking-horses.

The next day, when Vera climbed up to the loft again, the wooden horse was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

RALPH DID IT!

THEN came three days of rain and chill and gloom, when stricken summer seemed suddenly aging to autumn. Under the whip of the rain the bright flowers bent their spoiled heads and the leaves swirled down; and the deer in the park, reproachful-eyed, huddled together under shelter of the trees; and disconsolate under-gardeners trudged about with sacking over their shoulders; and the nest of late-hatched greenfinches, which Vera had found in the privet hedge near the tennis courts, was full of water and stark little corpses. Vera bethought herself of this nest on the third wet day and ran out through the rain only to find it thus desolated. She returned, dripping, and in defiant mood.

"All dead, every man Jack of 'em!" she said. "What 's it all for, Cedric, old man? Well, we may ask, but we shan't get an answer."

Cedric took the poker and struck sparks from the blazing logs on the hearth. He and Vera were in the great hall, where the panels and furnishings were oaken and a sober luxury reigned.

Bold-eyed Carshalton men, with Cedric's own malignness of brow, looked down upon them from the walls, and the dead-and-gone unhappy women, of whom Cedric had spoken, stood in gracious attitudes, smiling vacuously, as rank and riches should smile in the imagination of a Court painter. The storm-subdued light from the gallery above fell sombrely upon the Cain and Abel tapestry at the turn of the wide oaken staircase, lowering its colour and heightening its suggestion of tragedy; and the whole great expanse of roof above echoed the sullen message of the rain.

"The Lord is angry! The Lord is angry! He sends out the water-spouts," murmured Nana in the gallery, bending over to peer at Vera and Cedric below.

"You are dripping all over this tiger skin, Vera," said Cedric testily. "Why on earth did you go out into the rain?"

"Because she's a fool," said a surly voice above.

Cedric looked up furiously and saw Nana on one side of the gallery and Evelyn and Ralph on the other. At Ralph's insult and Cedric's scowl, Evelyn, who had been looking at the pictures in the Long Corridor, gave a faint scream; and Nana hurried down the staircase, saying testily:

"Miss Droylsden, dear, you are very wet. Come with me at once, and I will get you hot water and dry clothes."

"I'm all right," said Vera. "I only want to go where I can shake without spoiling things."

"Well, you can't shake here," said Nana imperiously. "Come with me at once, Miss Droylsden, dear."

"All right," said Vera, quite good-naturedly. "I'll be back directly, Cedric."

Vera cast an unmoved glance at Ralph as she passed him. What did she care that he had called her a fool? She always held herself above personal abuse: arguing that all the people whom she liked, liked her, so what more could she want? And it was for no mean motive of personal revenge that she desired the whip-hand of this wild boy who hated her. It was to keep him off Cedric. That was the way she put it. But the cry of her heart rang a tone of anguish: it was to keep Cedric hers—to keep him hers!

Nana, who thought that in removing Miss Droylsden she was removing the bone of contention, had never made a greater mistake in her life. And now Lady Carshalton, always inopportunity, came upon the scene. In those weary days of rain and gloom, when all healthy out-of-door life was impossible, the feud between the twins had grown like some evil plant in a forcing-house. Carshalton Court was large, but far too small to hold their bitter enmity. Cedric could not bear to pass Ralph on the stairs or sit with him at table; Ralph seemed to find malicious delight

in thrusting himself on Cedric's notice. The servants spent many a pleasant moment in gossiping over the affair, sternly checked, now and then, by old Hawkins, the butler, whose religion was worship of the Family. Lady Carshalton prayed about it morning, noon, and night; and, having gained a faint courage, at this inopportune moment desired her sons to come to her in her boudoir. Hawkins, who brought the message, found Cedric glowering by the hall fire and Ralph sneering at him from above; Miss Manners standing by in an attitude of dismay, like a pretty little actress.

"She can't want us both," said Cedric, evidently resenting the message as an impertinence. "Which does she want, Hawkins?"

"Both, your lordship. My lady said so quite clearly."

The old man stood his ground and waited.

"Well, you need not play policeman, Hawkins," said Cedric impatiently. "Of course if her ladyship wants us we must go."

He walked off haughtily and Ralph, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

Many a mother looks with wonder at the man she has brought into this world, thinking fearfully of the time when he was a dimpled, dumpling baby; but not many mothers have to face such a forbidding-looking pair of young rascals as Cedric and Ralph when they appeared

before Lady Carshalton. Yet Cedric spoke politely.

"You sent for us, mother," he said.

His cold eye declared plainly enough, "And now we have come you are afraid of us."

Cedric liked not Fear; yet he was remotely sorry for her and tried to help her out.

"Shall we sit down?" he said. "We're not quite prisoners at the bar, are we? Or, if we are, you are a gentle judge."

"Oh, my boy," Lady Carshalton said then, speaking from a full heart, "there are crimes that go unpunished, and those are the very crimes that eat into a soul and destroy it. My boy—my boys—" she rose and turned to Ralph, stretching out her hands in a fluttering gesture of appeal, "of such is deadly hatred."

She had struck home. For one moment the boys stood silent, realising that this was the woman who had borne them in pain and anguish; who had since endured them in sorrow and weariness. They owed her far more than they had ever tried to pay. Then Cedric hardened his heart.

"You are right, mother," he said, "but you have not said the last word of the truth. Of such crimes, too, is treachery. Are we Mandevilles to learn to love it? We have always been a bad lot, yet history does not tell of one of our family who lost his head for treason. It is in my blood

to hate it. I am sorry to pain you, mother, but I must speak the truth."

"Is that the last word of the truth?" she asked, quoting his words against him, with amazing courage. "Is that the whole quarrel between you? If so, I entreat you to be friends with Ralph and to blame me only. Yes, blame me only," she added mournfully; "for I listened to his tale-bearing—I, in my weakness. And I am used to living my life alone: it will be no new thing for me. You will not hate your poor mother; you will, perhaps, even be a little sorry for her."

"I am sorry for you, mother," Cedric said quite gently, "but I cannot prove it by visiting Ralph's sins upon you."

"Nor I," said Ralph haughtily, "by visiting upon you Cedric's amazing follies."

"Yet you visit them upon me daily," declared she. "Daily I suffer in seeing the growth of this bitter root of hatred. And I am so terribly in the dark. Is Vera Droylsden the only ground of quarrel between you?"

Cedric set his face like a stone at Vera Droylsden's name. His pride was such that he would never defend her. He, the heir, who meant to remain the heir, had chosen her: that was enough. And Ralph, raging inwardly like a jealous woman, choked down his wrath and was silent too. He had in his pocket an encouraging communication from the firm of disreputable solicitors in London;

and he had no intention of spoiling his plans by setting Oxonford on the track. There was another motive, unconfessed, that bound the twins to silence. Alone they had stood in love, alone they would stand in hatred: they two, face to face, the whole world disregarded. It was a strange loyalty in disloyalty, understood by no one better than by Vera Droylsden.

"Ralph can tell you what he pleases," challenged Cedric.

"Cedric can tell you just anything he likes," threw out Ralph; and they glared at each other with a fine show of haughtiness.

Lady Carshalton, who had no sense of humour, sank wearily into a chair, knowing that her chance had gone by. Cedric bent over her and kissed her on the forehead, and Ralph said patronisingly, "Poor little mother!" She had gained some unaccustomed pity, that was all; and it hurt, oh, how it hurt! When she was left alone the tears ran through her slender fingers—she owed it to Oxonford that she was still young enough in heart to cry—and then she prayed and prayed; and presently, growing calmer, became aware of a dramatic stir in the house: loud voices, running, a smothered cry. She came out into the gallery and, looking down into the hall, saw her boys, one pale, the other crimson with passion. And Oxonford, in dripping riding-dress, had Ralph by the collar and was saying:

"Hang it all, man! I don't blame you, for he has a lashing tongue; but think a moment before you run in again."

Vera Droylsden, only half dressed, stood by Cedric in strong indignation, finding no word of reproach for Ralph that would not point at her loved one's cruel infirmity. It was for merciless, raging Ralph to strike that old wound.

"You take all," he cried, "and yet a fellow can't fight you! It is well to be a cripple!"

"Lord in Heaven!" moaned old Nana. "Poor boy! You little know! You little know!"

And Vera, looking at Cedric's ghastly face and knowing in her bleeding heart that she had no comfort for him, shook off sobbing Evelyn and rushed away up-stairs. She had the presence of mind to go to her room and throw on a coat to cover her disarray; then on to Carshalton's suite, stumbling blindly at a corner over the little eavesdropping kitchen-maid, who cried out pitifully, "Oh, dear miss, dear miss!" and shrank away frightened by the look on her idol's face.

With a strong effort Vera pulled herself together at the door of the sick-room.

"Nurse," she said, in a level voice, "Nana wants you in the east wing. I will sit with Lord Carshalton until you come back."

And when the woman was gone Vera threw herself on her knees by Carshalton, and took his

hand; and the tears rolled down her cheeks as she exclaimed:

“My dear old boy, look at me, look at me! I ’m in trouble and only you can help me. It ’s the truth I want: only the truth can help me. Oh, do try and speak! Who was it lamed Cedric? Some one did it, I know. Who was it?”

And the stammering tongue, set free for a moment in answer to prayer, said quite clearly:

“Ralph—Ralph did it!”

CHAPTER XVII

"BRUIN"

THE sharp sword of vengeance was in Vera's hand now, and yet she did not strike. Asking herself why, she could find no clear answer. It was not compunction; for her nature had been stirred to its very dregs by Ralph's cruel taunt, and out of the depths of her so human heart which the psalmist would have declared was deceitful and desperately wicked, had risen the passion of revenge. She had not thought that she could hate as she hated Ralph now. Cedric's smitten face was ever before her. "One of these good days," she said to herself, "Ralph shall look like that." Yet Vera, who had never known fear, was held back by some warning instinct and did not strike.

"I will not be hurried," she said to Evelyn, who was longing for fresh developments and hoped they would be strong and spicy. "I am not a fool woman to do things all of a rush. I am Bruin's cub, and ought to have been a boy. I shall go slow, as men do."

And suddenly there came over her a passion

of longing and regret for Bruin and her boys and the dear old careless life in Oxfordshire; and she sat down and wrote her father such a letter as she had never written him before. There was not a word of fret or fear in it, but there was a warm rush of affection; and if Bruin, unlearned in slang, had to skip a word here and there, he had been young once and had not forgotten the classics of love.

"My girl is not quite happy, or she would not turn to the old man," he murmured. "That boy is not giving her all she wants."

Arthur Bernard Droylsden was a proud man in his way: had never pushed himself into the company of his betters; but he took an early train to London one morning after reading Vera's letter and, arriving at Carshalton Court about midday, asked for Lady Carshalton. He was taken into her favourite small drawing-room; and in a few minutes, my lady, who had been walking in her Italian garden, came in through the long windows from the terrace. She had, perhaps, feared, on reading his card, to meet Vera Droylsden's father, not knowing what manner of man he might be; and she faltered a little as she came. And he, getting to his feet, found himself in the presence of a helpless, high-born lady; and, forgetting his scholar's shyness, remembered, with a pleasant thrill, his man's strength, and so took the hand she offered him

with a very gentle reverence. Her glance, wide and bright as a girl's, thanked him.

"I have taken a liberty, Lady Carshalton," he said in his deliberate way. "My excuse is that I have but one child."

"You have not come to take her away, I hope?" she said graciously.

"I have not come to take her away," he answered. "I know what the young think love is. They will not be checked. But I have come to look at her because she is my only child, by whom, much as I love her, I have not, perhaps, done all my duty. For I do not conceal from you the fact that I often wish all this had never been."

The man's pride spoke clearly, but still more clearly spoke his anxiety; and Lady Carshalton, liking him, forgave him.

"I wished that too, at first," she said, in her soft, troubled tones; "but now, in spite of a mother's natural jealousy—" she smiled at him faintly,—“I do not think I wish it altered. Vera would be surprised to hear me, for I have not always been quite kind to her, Mr. Droylsden."

"Could you be unkind?" he asked; and found himself speaking gently, as to a child.

"Not really unkind," she said. "I do not mean that. But we have not been able to get very near each other; and perhaps it is my fault. I ought to try and learn her language."

"It takes some learning," said he, frowning slightly. "She has been brought up with boys, and talks their slang. But you would be surprised to hear her construe Virgil—quite surprised. She has quite the classic touch when she likes—when she likes."

"Indeed!" said the lady, looking rather alarmed.

Mr. Droylsden drew a letter from his pocket book.

"The classic is absent from this," he said dryly. "Yet read it, Lady Carshalton, if you will."

Having read it, she returned it to him, smiling very prettily.

"What does 'up against' mean?" she asked. "And what is 'swank'? Oh no, don't trouble to tell me. Perhaps you do not know yourself. But you know that love prompted this letter. Thank you for showing it to me. And I wish," she added, rising and moving towards the door, "that I had letters like that from a child of mine. Come, let us find Vera."

They found her swinging in a hammock, smoking and talking to Cedric. Jack, who lay across her knees, pricked up his ears and wagged his tail at sight of Mr. Droylsden. Vera turned to see who was coming; then rolled out of the hammock with anything but a classic exclamation.

"Holy smoke! It's Bruin! My dear old

boy! My good old bear! Have they kept you short of buns?"

"No," he answered, looking at her with a shaggy wistfulness, "but I wanted to see what my girl was doing. Vera, my dear," pointing to her cigarette, "I don't think Lady Carshalton can like this."

The girl threw her cigarette away.

"Lady Carshalton takes me as I am, and is good to me," she said; and it was not for the first time that Vera's look had declared, "I would love her, if she would let me."

The lady's answering glance was kindly. "She likes my Bruin," was Vera's quick thought. "Now if Evelyn were Bruin's girl and engaged to Cedric, Lady Carshalton would have some one to love."

Cedric was genuinely glad to see Mr. Droylsden. Here, in his beautiful ancestral home, he felt himself no longer the boy-pupil, too callow to be welcomed as Vera's suitor, but the heir of all, who could do the honours very gracefully. And he played this pleasant part with a modesty which the elder man appreciated. Lady Carshalton was quite charmed with Mr. Droylsden. She wandered about the gardens with him, slipping her hand through Vera's arm to please him, and feeling herself, in his presence, strongly drawn to the girl. And he looked at everything with the appreciation of the scholar and man of

culture, to whom all things beautiful are a glad possession by virtue of the very sight of them; so that, having nothing, he may yet possess all things. Here then, thought his hostess, was the secret of Vera's cool acceptance of her new position: it was not mere bravado or diplomacy, after all.

Lady Carshalton showed Mr. Droylsden all her pet plants—for, like all lonely women, she had her little hobbies—and he gave them long Latin names which rather alarmed her, until she found that she was not expected to remember any of them, Bruin having a comfortable conviction of the invincible ignorance of women. But Vera knew so many of these names that Lady Carshalton said:

"You are a very terrible young woman. I hope you will not begin translating Ovid to me, for I understand that he is not quite proper."

Cedric stared at his mother. He had never heard her make a joke before.

Oxonford came in to luncheon, which was quite a pleasant meal. Ralph, it is true, was sulky, and Evelyn was at her old trick of watching the newcomer; but little cared Bruin.

"A pretty, modest young girl," was his comment on Miss Manners afterwards. "It is no wonder that Ralph finds old fogies dull, when she is there. A moody young fellow, he seems; but moodiness is a fault of youth."

Vera listened to this in silence. She had longed for Bruin; and now it was hers to know how far the stream of destiny had swept her from him. She loved him not less, but more, the more her nature awoke; but she had gone beyond the old life and never more could return to it. The secret of a great house was in her keeping; not to be passed on even to the man who had given her being. Something more than life he had given her: individuality; and for this gift will the father of every child not born an idiot be sooner or later left out of the running.

Lady Carshalton, parent of two alien spirits, was in full sympathy with Vera's father now.

"Take Mr. Droylsden into the library," she said to the girl after luncheon. "He loves books, I know." And she added low, with a compelling look, "He loves his daughter too."

Left alone with Oxonford, Lady Carshalton said:

"He shall have his chance: such chance as parents ever have. At least she will be kind to him."

"Yes, she will be kind," he agreed.

"Oh, Oxonford, why this awful gulf all the world over between parent and child? Why this ceaseless war between the generations? Nothing is farther from you, though nothing is dearer, than the creature you were at such pains to fashion. What a terrible universal law!"

“I don’t know much about filial relations,” Oxonford answered, almost roughly. “My parents died before I was six. But if the law is universal, my dear lady, you would do well to bow to it. Law is order, and a difficult submission is the highest we know.”

“There speaks the philosophic male,” said she, with her faint smile. “A woman does not think like that. Her one submission is to the law of Love; and that is not difficult.”

“Women are born law-breakers,” he said, still with some harshness in his tone. “That little twisted poet, Pope, noticed it, and we have been proving it ever since. Don’t I know it well! It’s the women who make right-of-way through our hedges and fields, where right they have none: the women who wade through our standing grass after the moon-daisies and sorrel, through our wheat after a pretty corn-flower or two. You see the track of their ruthless skirts in all places where pretty baubles grow. And they smile at us and think it’s our privilege to forgive them and even to beg them to do it again.”

“But the men do the poaching,” said she.

He had her hands now. It was all he could do to keep himself from kissing her with violence; for the strong man had his bad moments.

“Yes, the men do the poaching,” he said, looking straight at her.

She reddened like a girl, so that his chivalry was called to her aid.

"We are on to the war between the sexes now," he said. "Unbelievable! You and I!"

There was tenderness beneath the lightness. His words rang on in her heart: "You and I!" She wondered if every tried human being had some such hidden well of sweetness to make life bearable. She would have prayed that it might be so but for a habit, rarely broken, of keeping the thought of Oxonford apart from her religious exercises, as a thing contraband. And so she prayed, instead, for Vera's father.

Bruin, standing in the library, with a first edition held close to his short-sighted eyes, was quite unconscious of being a subject for intercession. He was guiltless of the trick of making pictures of life with himself as the central figure. But he felt, more or less vaguely, that the situation was beyond his grasp and that something in Vera absent had called out to him for help of which her presence disclaimed the need. Here was the young woman, calm and serene, picking him out rare specimens of the printer's and the binder's art, as if she had been born to all these fine surroundings, and born, moreover, without any assistance from him. Loving him better than ever,—there was comradeship in her every glance—she seemed, nevertheless, to have gone beyond him. Something of all this he managed

to stammer out: his fatherly pity showing clear through the broken phrases. Vera's face softened to absolute beauty. She slipped her hand through his arm.

“In fact, Bruin dear, we are father and daughter,” she said, and stopped short.

“Don't you understand?” she asked then, drawing him to the window.

Below them lay the lawns, levelled by centuries of care and culture, of an emerald greenness where the sunlight released the turf from the purple-black shadows of great cedars: those trees so reminiscent of far-off times when topmost Hermon seemed to reach the lowest gates of heaven. In and out of their dark majesty little song-birds—mute now in the full pause of summer—and twittering sparrows slipped, unafraid. Beyond the lawns, with their bright fringes of colour, beyond the dim, intricate shrubberies and the sunny, fruit-walled kitchen-gardens stretched the park; falling, rising a little, falling again, like a great wave-offering of verdure, in sevenfold return for the gift of heaven's sun and showers. From Carshalton Court, standing high on its terraces on this western side, a glimpse could be caught of the open country, where the harvest was being gathered in and where horses, labourers, farmers, toiled in the Carshalton interest, which—thanks to Oxonford—was their own interest also. Not a trout in the streams, not a hare in

its form, not a partridge whirring up before the reapers, not a pheasant stepping daintily from the woodside, but had its being for the sake of Carshalton and Carshalton's dependents. And, with a royal ease, the great house reposed on its terraces, dominating the country; but that ease meant centuries of labour, light to look upon, hard in the achievement. Even now, as Vera Droylsden looked from the library window, a boy was being hectored by an under-gardener, who himself had felt, an hour earlier, the lashing tongue of that great man, Wills, the head-gardener. And down in Carshalton churchyard lay generations of peasants, who had spent their strength on the land, bred to labour like the beasts that perish, with desires but little higher; while, away in the south wing, the lord of it all was halting dumbly to his end.

"I have taken all this upon me," said Vera Droylsden. "Bruin, dear, you are a stranger within these gates; and I shall be but little more until I am the mother of the next heir. I have taken all this upon me"—her hand swept the landscape. "How can I go back?"

"My child," said Bruin, "are you happy?"

"I should be as miserable as sin if I went back," said Vera. "There's no peace to be got for me out of a dead negation. I'm going to be of some use here, because I'm the only decent woman in England who could pull the thing through."

"You love this boy? He is no more than a boy."

"I love him," she answered solemnly, "well enough to see all that he is not. And what comes to me I can bear: that 's all about it."

There was silence for a minute, then Vera said:

"No more pow-wow! Tell me about Alfred Seaton and La Bercée. Are they coming back next term? Yes? That 's good news. I love my boys. Now get to your rare editions. Paw them gently, good old bear."

Cedric and Vera motored Bruin to Bedringham station in the late afternoon. Just outside the lodge gates Vera, who was driving, stopped the car and got down to comfort a fallen, crying child. She picked him up smartly, dusted him down, set him on his legs again, and said:

"Cheer up, Tommy! You're not killed this time, you know, old man. It will feel much worse than this when you are. Cheer up, I say!"

As she wiped his eyes with her handkerchief and smiled back at the dawning smile in them, Cedric, who had been looking on with cold tolerance, flung a shilling for him.

"Catch, Vera! Give it to the kid, and let us get on."

Vera caught the coin deftly enough; and clasped the child's small, grimy hand over it. And then she got into the car and drove on saying, "That was a windfall for Tommy."

But Bruin in the train had a vision of insolent Cedric, lavishing money where love was wanted.

"He should not have my girl if I could help it," he muttered.

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE NEVER CAN TELL

BRUIN'S visit left Vera restless. The old times were over: never so fully had she realised it; yet they pulled at her heart. Soon she would go back home, and La Bercée would be there, and Alfred Seaton; and yet it would all be different. They would be her boys still; and she would be no longer theirs, but Cedric's.

This brought her to the question of Cedric's future. Bruin had advised Oxford for him, but Cedric gathered that Lord Carshalton had some ultimatum to deliver on the point. So far as Cedric's heart could be moved to pity it was moved by his father's wrecked condition. At the best Carshalton's time must be short, thought the boy. Let him, if possible, have his last say.

Lord Carshalton had not broken into definite speech again, though his attempts were many and pitiful. Quite evidently he had some darling wish that he could not express. Vera was sure that it concerned her relations with Cedric.

"Don't fret," she said to Carshalton again, "we will find out what you want some day."

When she told him of Mr. Droylsden's visit, he seemed in a fidget of anxiety; pointing at her and shaking his head again and again. At last she divined part of his meaning.

"No, I am not going to leave Carshalton," she assured him. "I shall not go until I find out what you want. There, my dear old boy, don't fret. You'll be able to say it clear enough, some day. I'm not going, I tell you; and my word is as safe as the Bank of England."

Then, still in the grip of the strong nostalgia induced by Bruin's coming, she went to find Evelyn. Evelyn was as hard in head and heart as a small Barcelona nut; yet she was a woman: some one to talk to, some one who would listen. But Evelyn was with Ralph, who would not let her go. He hated Vera more than ever. She had not only taken Cedric: she was ruining Evelyn. He told her so quite plainly. Vera shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I'll give you this morning to save her in, anyhow," she said coolly, as she strolled away.

Cedric was found in the stables, giving orders to the grooms, with his lean hand on the mane of a thoroughbred, which he would have given worlds to have been able to ride. Thinner even than his hand was his face, with its cold mouth and black-browed brilliant eyes. Daily he wore more and more the look of one consumed by some pain of the soul, or by some spirit-sapping disease

of the body. His look lightened a little at sight of Vera; and they strolled away together in easy comradeship. But a weight lay upon Vera's heart: the pressure, she could but think, of some near climax. Impossible to tell her trouble to this boy, whose soul was pining in silence for that which it hated. Cedric's very force was coldness. Lightly, therefore, she talked to him; and had her reward in his willingness to be near her. He praised her, too.

"Old Bruin is a real brick," he said: "his own daughter's father."

Then followed the antiphone: "Ralph is fooling around, as usual, with that futile Manners girl."

Ralph! Ralph! It all turned to Ralph. Never before in all her short life—the life that seems so long to impetuous nineteen—had Vera felt such need of help; never before had her spirit known fear. Some dread thing was coming to her: was even now quite close. Vainly she tried to gloat over the sword of revenge in her hand. Something warned her against its use. She dare not strike the hated Ralph; and unaccustomed fear is woful to a strong nature. The loneliness also of the hater was upon her; for it is love that makes the world go round.

At luncheon Lady Carshalton appeared to be in poor spirits. The sight of her drooping thus roused Vera's strength.

"What she has borne, I can bear, and more also," thought the girl. "Poor woman! What has she to look forward to? And I have Cedric. I have him and will keep him."

She pushed Cedric aside after luncheon and held the door open for her hostess in her most gentlemanly fashion. Lady Carshalton's smile said plainly, as she fled past, "I do not forget that nice man, your father."

Still unaccountably desiring woman's companionship, Vera drifted to Nana. The old woman was kind, but uneasy; trying, as Evelyn had said, to hatch her addled lie. Vera's sense of humour was tickled by the complex situation: so many futile mortals, each trying to hide something from some one else; and humour is a strong healer. The girl pulled herself together like a thoroughbred. Driven she was by bit and bridle; but she felt she had the bit between her teeth and could go the pace again.

Later in the day, by art and craft, the two girls got together; and it was Evelyn who did most of the talking, after all. Smoking delicately, she vented her cool little views on the subject of Bruin.

"I'm really rather afraid of him," she said. "He looks so learned. I felt sure he was going to examine me; and when I was questioned at school it all went out of my head. School-masters have a way of looking at you as if you were a

duffer; and that makes you behave like one. And you know, Vera," she added ingeniously, "they don't want you to answer right, or their occupation would be gone. You oblige them by being a little dull, just as you oblige a clergyman by being a little wicked: not horribly immoral, of course, but just bad enough to make your conversion in the near future a possibility. It makes him feel so good and useful, don't you know!"

Vera stared at her.

"I'm bothered if I know whether you are a complete goose or the most artful minx alive," she said.

"I am not a minx," said Miss Evelyn, with her sidelong look. "Mother never could have had a minx for a daughter; nothing so vulgar!"

She added keenly: "I don't think I am such a fool as I look. I know something has gone wrong with you, Vera. What is it? Where is your pluck? We have got Ralph so neatly, and yet you will not speak. What are you waiting for?"

"The psychological moment, I suppose," said Vera shortly.

"Oh, bother! I want things to happen. I should have rushed at him at once. I should love to see his face change."

"You cruel little wretch!" said Vera.

"Why, so would you," declared Evelyn.

"Don't be so high-class and immaculate. You know you hate Ralph."

"Yes, I hate him," said Vera slowly. "That is my excuse. I hate him genuinely, and I don't believe you really do. I would n't step on a worm just to see it wriggle; and it seems to me you would. I hate Ralph, and I mean to hurt him in defence of Cedric, whom I love. Perhaps that may be no excuse in the sight of 'Them above,' as Nana says; but it clears me in my own eyes, anyhow. When was it that every man did that which was right in his own eyes? I ought to have been born in those good old days."

"It's somewhere in the Bible," said Evelyn, sticking out a dainty shoe and looking at it affectionately. "I'll ask father when I see him. He'll look it up in a concordance. Poor father! He does n't really know anything, but he is great on concordances and encyclopædias. How different he is from Mr. Droylsden! Lady Carshalton likes your Bruin, Vera."

"She likes you, too, Evelyn. You are not worthy of it, but she does."

"Yet I am not half so sorry for her as you are," said Evelyn thoughtfully. "I believe you would cut off your finger to save her from pain; and I only simper at her and look pretty. (I am pretty, Vera, so don't say I am not!) The fact is that she rather bores me. I'm frightfully easily bored," said Evelyn, sighing.

"Poor Lady Carshalton!" said Vera. "What is there left for her, I wonder?"

"There is always Mr. Oxonford."

"Oh, shut up about Mr. Oxonford," said Vera. "That comfort is more than half martyrdom, as you would know if you had a heart as big as a pea in your body. No, but I will tell you what is left."

"What?"

"Just you, Evelyn. She could love you, as you were before I found you. What is good for me is not good for you. I see it more plainly every day. Hurl that cigarette away, child! I'm thankful to you for liking me, but you must be your own dainty self again. You must marry Ralph and be good to Lady Carshalton. She misses her girl-baby just as much as she did at first. The boys don't care for her. I mean to stick to Cedric, but he is as hard as a stone, really. I'm not afraid any more, though I was in a deadly funk this morning. But poor Lady Carshalton! Yes, you will have to marry Ralph."

"Marry Ralph, indeed!" cried Evelyn, "knowing all that I do about him!"

She stopped short; for Ralph was in the doorway, looking as if under visitation of God. Evelyn gave a little cry when she saw his face. But Vera took a cigarette from her case and stuck it between her lips, looking down her nose in cool, manful fashion as she lighted it. Then

she stood astride on the hearth-rug, puffing out smoke and waiting. For this was her supreme moment: she would not shorten it. Evelyn, whether in an access of soft-heartedness or because drama demanded it, covered her face. Ralph tore her hands away.

"What lie have you got hold of now?" he cried.

Evelyn looked helplessly at Vera, who shrugged her shoulders and said:

"'T is between you two. Tell him, Evelyn, why you won't marry him—heir or no heir."

"You devil!" cried Ralph furiously; and Vera laughed, in full reaction from the depression of the morning. But her laughter died at the sound of an unequal tread upon the stairs. She feared—oh, bitterly—to wound him whom she loved.

"What is all this about?" asked Cedric, entering wearily. "Why are you glaring like Kilkenny cats? I tell you what. I'm about sick of all these goings-on. It does n't seem to me that there is room for both of us fellows here. Shall we toss up which of us shall quit?"

"No doubt you would win the toss," sneered Ralph.

Vera fired at that. She threw her cigarette away.

"Seems to me," she said, "that we have had that toss rubbed in enough. What are those blue papers in your hand, Ralph? Lawyers'

letters, eh? They can't do anything for you, my poor boy. We keep the title."

"'T is what you are playing for, of course," said Ralph. "But, Evelyn, I don't understand you. Are you going to let that devil of a girl rub all the bloom off you? You say you will not marry me. Well, I would not marry you, if you got like Vera Droylsden. I would n't stretch out my hand to take you. If you knelt at my feet, I'd not trouble to raise you. I'd—I'd——"

He stopped, stammering, in a white heat of passion; and never was love more fully declared than by the denial of it. But Evelyn did not understand. It seemed to her that she, Evelyn Manners, had been wantonly brought to market, wantonly rejected. The hot blood flooded her fairness; the feminine instinct to strike got the better of her.

"The Manners women do not marry sneaks and traitors," she cried. "Who lamed Cedric for life, and then went back on him? Who did it? You, Ralph, you! They kept it from you, because they were sorry for you. But you did it. Ask Nana! Ask Lord Carshalton, if he can bear the sight of you!"

Health and life died out of Ralph's face, leaving it so strangely like Cedric's that Vera's heart sank within her. And it was to his twin that Ralph turned, with voiceless questioning, in

this, his bad moment: to his once-beloved twin. And the once-beloved, stirred in Heaven knows what linked fibres of his being, called by Heaven knows what searching tone of that second self whose voice he had thought for ever stilled, limped hurriedly across the room and laid his frail hand in the strong hand he had upheld from childhood, saying:

“By Jove, old chap, what hard luck for you! What very beastly hard luck!”

Oh, frail woman's vengeance! Heart to heart stood the twins:—the once-beloved, the ever-beloved:—in a manifestation of dual egoism so perfect as to seem the highest unselfishness: breath of life to each other, coldness of death to all the world beside.

CHAPTER XIX

ECLIPSED

EVERY one in the great house knew it; and every one was watching Miss Droylsden: especially Evelyn, who was terribly sorry for her. Less than most proud girls Vera felt the sting of this. She was keeping her head up; keeping strong hold upon herself; waiting, as some men seem to wait, to know what she was really going to feel about it all and how she had best act.

"I will go slow," she resolved. "One thing is dead certain: I will play it off my own bat."

Lady Carshalton was amazed to the point of fright when the twins talked to each other at dinner. Her wistful looks and pauses, unnoticed by her sons, drew the most chivalrous attention from Vera Droylsden. Instinctively the elder woman knew that the younger, though she might be suffering Inquisition tortures, would tell her nothing. She was to be treated politely and left out of it all. Oh, increasing bitterness of her ineffectuality! Longing for Oxonford, she drifted, as usual, to her faithful Nana.

"What does it mean? What is coming now?" was her cry. "I have prayed that my boys might be friends again, and now my prayer is answered, and I am afraid. It is so strange and sudden. What does it all mean? Did they quarrel about the toss? Or did one of them do something dreadful? Or was it only Miss Droylsden, after all? Is she to be left in the cold now, and Evelyn, too? The boys are as they were before: the whole world shut out. What does it all mean?"

Nana shook her head.

"You prayed, my lady," she replied grimly, "and your prayer is answered. Isn't that enough for a poor mortal? We don't all get that much here below."

"I am their mother," said Lady Carshalton, suddenly flaming into passion. "Does a man ever know what that means?"

"I take it he does n't," replied Nana. "But even a bad son has his uses. He holds the cup of suffering to your lips, my lady; and, for the sake of Him you pray to, you must drink and give thanks. For He suffered more."

There was silence in the room, while the two women realised the darkness of their fears. Speaking low at last, Lady Carshalton said:

"If you could give me any earthly comfort, you would"; and Nana answered:

"That is true. We turn to Heaven last—even the best of us do."

Downstairs in the billiard-room all seemed light and cheerfulness. When Hawkins took in coffee, Cedric and Ralph were playing billiards, and Vera was backing Cedric; while Evelyn, following her friend's lead, petted the Persian cat and flung light malice at Ralph. The girls were meeting ill-luck gamely, yet all through the household went the word that Miss Droylsden's day was over. As Vera went to her room, the poor little kitchen-maid, who adored her from afar, trembled out from a corner and seized her hand, saying once again:

"Oh, dear miss, dear miss!"

It seemed to Vera, unused to pity, that here was the first realised bitterness of the blow. She looked down at the little agitated piece of humanity and said:

"You good little soul! Won't you get it hot, if you are caught here! And I should be sorry, you know. So scoot, clear out, as fast as ever you can."

"You're not angry with me, miss?"

"Angry? No, child! I tell you you are a good little thing—one of the best. What is that dull banging?"

"It's the door in the east wing, miss," said the small maid, shivering—"the ghost door. It bodes coming ill, they say; but who can tell if there is any truth in it?"

"I guess it 's true enough," said Vera, as she went to her room. "I guess that ghost won't be damned for a lying spirit if it bangs doors here. It 's got the right tip this time, anyway."

Vera had forbidden Evelyn to visit her in her room to-night. "What 's the good of cackling? I 'm off to sleep," she had said.

But very soon some one knocked softly and entered. It was Nana, of course. She found Miss Droylsden, as she had found her once before, at the open window. Vera's candles were unlighted, but the round and golden harvest moon, caught above the dreaming world in a light September mist, showed her profile cool and still as the night. She sat with her feet on a second chair, in an attitude beloved of the laconic male. The room, with its dark, carved furniture and great four-poster, in which a queen had slept, long ago, was full of half-revealed mystery; and from the depths of the park an owl called unceasingly. The girl seemed the one thing at ease in the brooding, broken stillness.

"Well?" she said, turning to the old woman. "No need to light up this time, eh? You have seen me often enough, and I look the same as usual, you know."

Nana's quick ear caught the note of defiance.

"I should n't take a rush-light to look into your heart," she said.

"My heart is all right," said Vera; "but my

temper is only middling. Well, Nana, what do you want to ask me? Blow it out."

"I wish you would tell me all you know, Miss Droylsden."

"That's a large order. Question me categorically, and I'll see if I will."

Nana hesitated.

"You are an old fox," said Vera then. "You don't want to do that because, if I know nothing, your questions will tell me something. Isn't that so?"

Nana laughed.

"I wish young folks were n't so clever," she said. "It puts me out a bit. You see, knowing his lordship all these years, I've grown to think clever people can't be good. It puts me out a bit, it does."

"I'm not good, Nana. If you asked me an awkward question, I should tell a lie, like——"

"Like what, Miss Droylsden?"

"Like an awfully decent woman I once knew," said Vera, chuckling. "There now, I have answered one of your questions. You perceive that I knew you did n't lame Cedric. Never mind, Nana, I forgive you."

"'T is I must forgive you," said Nana shrewdly, "for not being deceived. I'd rather you'd been deceived. 'T was for your good, Miss Droylsden, dear."

"I don't like powders done up in jam," said

Vera. "I'd rather take 'em neat. You know what you are in for then."

"Seems to me," said Nana keenly, "that you are having to take them neat now."

"Now, Nana," said Vera, rising imperiously, "you had better go. You won't get any more out of me to-night. When I want your help, I'll come to you. And you'll give it me. Yes you will, you good old sinner! Good-night."

And so Nana found herself outside an unlocked room, which she no more dared re-enter than if it had been guarded by flaming swords in angel hands. She returned to her own quarters, muttering and shaking her head, but not altogether ill-pleased.

"My dearest lady," thought Nana, "can lean on her when I am gone."

The old woman's curiosity moved her to wait for the twins, who were still downstairs. She sat with her door open, straining her ears for footsteps on the stairs. When she heard them she slipped out into the great gallery and saw Ralph's hand on Cedric's shoulder, his handsome face softened almost to goodness. And from Cedric, cool and composed as ever, the weight of many years and of much pain seemed to have fallen. In the flickering light of their candles the Cain-and-Abel tapestry made a weird background to this scene; and Nana, remembering her past fears thus annulled, wondered for a moment what

was left for Lady Carshalton to dread. Then the boys saw her.

"Good old Nana," said Cedric; and Ralph nodded carelessly as they passed on.

Their supreme indifference cut hard. Reunited in their strong dual egoism, these boys had all the insolence of a Solomon without his wisdom. They recognised no right in heaven or earth but the divine right of doing what they pleased. And in the south wing lay the ruin of a man, sleepless, tormented by the moonlight, racked with half-remembered desire, unable even to give tongue and freely curse his Maker; while, not far off, her door strong-guarded by unseen angels, was Vera Droylsden, looking into the long future. Old Nana muttered and prayed and was sleepless through the night.

But Vera Droylsden slept. She was young and strong in will and body; and she slept quite calmly at last. Her awakening was the heavy thing. Having dressed quickly, she went out into the sunlit world: a world changed since yesterday; hers, therefore, thought strong Vera, to remodel to the best of her limitations. Now to discover what those limitations really were.

She went straight to the stable. Jack rushed at her when she opened the door. Dog-like, he jumped and barked and licked and chased a cat before falling finally to heel. He seemed the one thing unchanged in all the world. Even the

grooms touched their foreheads with a shade too much of sympathy.

Strolling through the gardens, Vera saw the low-growing plants and shrubs white-sheeted with cobwebs, whose every tiny mesh had caught its tiny shimmering dewdrop: little, pure, ephemeral nets that had taken, perhaps, a lifetime to make. And Vera waded through the orchard grass, where the dewdrops were coarser, but still radiant, and the fallen apples gleamed out red and green and golden. Jack followed close at her heels, sniffing and blowing; and overhead rooks cawed, and pigeons rose and dipped in a bath of pure sunlight. Over a thick, low, privet hedge looked high-coloured heads of dahlias, and the scent of late roses lingered in the air. On this rare September morning the strength of the world seemed gathering itself to resist decay.

In the midst of all this radiant freshness Vera could not bring herself to face the problem of life. The God-given morning was an anodyne of sweetness.

She wandered past the Carshalton hothouses, with no more than a careless glance for all their forced luxuriance, into the great, walled fruit-gardens. Here the head-gardener himself gathered peaches for her: the great man's way of expressing his sympathy. Vera accepted the offering in gratitude and good-fellowship, for the balm of the morning had entered into her spirit.

She was turning the fruit over in her hand, admiring its bloom, when Oxonford strolled into sight. He had walked over to the Court to breakfast.

"Have one, Mr. Oxonford?" Vera called out; and he went to her and took whimsical pains to choose the best of her peaches.

"Don't apologise!" she exclaimed. "I was brought up with boys."

The head-gardener smiled paternally as he walked away, touching his hat to Mr. Oxonford.

"Why is n't young Droylsden smoking?" said Oxonford then; and as he spoke Vera had a sudden pang of remembrance.

"What a stale question!" she said. "You asked it me ages ago—before the Flood, it must have been."

"And you said the world smelt too sweet."

"So do the roses this morning—much too sweet."

"Why don't you eat your peach, young Droylsden?"

She ate it thoughtfully; then looked up at him and said:

"It goes down good, as my dear La Bercée used to say, and it tastes just the same as it would have tasted yesterday."

"Why should n't it?" he asked quickly.

There was no need to answer. Looking round

at the sound of footsteps, Oxonford saw the twins coming, arm in arm.

"Hello, Oxonford, old man," Cedric called out. "I could do with a peach, Vera."

"I guess she has eaten them all," laughed Ralph.

Without looking at the girl Oxonford knew that she had her head up and was smiling bravely: her rare smile, which came when she was touched to the point of pain. He saw it all and called upon his gods, with a deep inward curse, for the reason why. The twins were together again. The one had forgotten to love Vera; the other had forgotten to hate her.

CHAPTER XX

THE TWINS DECAMP

"HE takes it for granted that you will marry him just the same, Vera," said Evelyn. "Jolly cool, I call it!"

"Well, I 'm not obliged to, if I don't want to," replied Vera.

"What do you want to do?" asked Evelyn curiously.

"That is just what I am trying to find out."

"Life is difficult," said Evelyn dangling her legs—she was sitting on the edge of the billiard-table. "I am rather tired of it. I want to be an angel."

"You can't. They 're not making any more. By the way, what are you going to do?"

"I am trying to find out too. Ralph is really much more tolerable now, you know. Quite agreeable, in fact. Of course he does n't care a rap about any one but Cedric, and probably never will again. But that would leave me very free, would n't it? I am inclined to think it would not be half bad."

She paused and added:

"That is, if you married Cedric. I really must have somebody.

"I should be of some use then," said Vera, with a shade of bitterness.

"Of course you would be of use," said Evelyn loyally. "And not only to me. A man like Cedric, with a great name, must marry. And he is deformed body and soul; and no one would be so good to him as you."

The unaccustomed colour rushed over Vera's pallor. This was the one little bit of comfort to which she had clung. It was sweet to hear it from another's lips. For Vera, boyish in habits, was Woman to the inmost part of her; and longed to be of use to those she loved. Now, out of the mist of dismay, a new image of herself began to arise: no longer that of a woman flung aside, but that of a woman resolutely fulfilling a difficult destiny.

"I can't talk about it any more, Eve," she said.

"I must fight it out for myself in my own way."

"I expect mother will do the fighting for me. Anyway it would be a comfort never to have to fight her any more. She is always right, and that is so tiring."

Any one ignorant of the situation and unlearned in the Carshalton character would have said that peace and joy were the order of the day at the Court now. Cedric and Ralph, in the first heat of their reconciliation, were satisfied with quiet

pleasures and in a mood of abnormal civility. The four young people motored together, played billiards and golf and bridge; and very often Vera could be heard vamping accompaniments to Ralph's banjo, in her own able-bodied manner. It was, as Evelyn had said, quite pleasant on the outside. Yet the household continued to whisper that Miss Droylsden's day was over, and the girl herself realised to the full the deadly change in her life. In her own phrase she was rather badly hit.

When the first benumbing force of the blow was over she tried to review the situation from a male standpoint. Cedric had not turned against her: worse than that, he had turned from her. Nevertheless it was probable that he loved her as much as he could love any woman: that is to say, he had a full toleration of her. The heir of Carshalton must have an heir; and she could be a strong mother to his children. To proud Vera this was a new view of her chief uses; yet she forced herself to consider it, in spite of the eternal revolt of femininity against its appointed destiny. Then there was Cedric's infirmity, which rendered him more unfortunate than she. So why not marry him? The objection springing up at once she classified as a piece of pure human cussedness: "Because he has so coolly taken it for granted that I will."

Ralph also took this quite coolly for granted.

All his objection to Vera Droylsden had vanished with her supremacy. She could no more strike a spark of malice from him now than she could win a word of love from Cedric. Many a little incident proved it. Looking down at her evening dress one night, she had said:

"I can't stay here much longer, or my frock will fall off me. It's near enough to that already, is n't it, Ralph?"

Formerly he had condemned its scantiness, saying, "If her gown is not an indecency, at least it is pure cheek, which is almost as bad." Now he looked at it tolerantly enough. "Oh, it's all right," he said.

This had smitten Vera hard. Ralph's hatred, Cedric's love, had been levelled to tolerance. She was simply outside them both.

The poor invalid upstairs had gathered somehow that all was not well with Vera. He himself had made but slow progress of late; his intense desire to speak hindering rather than helping him. His looks questioned Vera when his tongue could not; and often he stroked her boyish hand with his emaciated fingers, while his eyes filled with tears. It cut her to the heart to lie to him, but always she said:

"My dear old boy! I'm as right as ninepence, and I only wish you were!"

A lump rose in her throat at the thought of leaving him. He was more to her than a baby;

for he seemed to belong to that world of poor dumb animals whom the girl had always loved and pitied. Surely it would be a cruelty to leave him: like shutting the door upon a starving dog who had dumbly licked her hand. She had a fancy, too, that Lady Carshalton wanted her to stay; or why did she go about now looking like our Lady of all Sorrows? "I cannot go," said Vera; and yet another Vera answered, "Will you let him hold you cheap?" And then her heart cried out, "Cedric, my poor lamed boy—heir to so much fortune and misfortune!" And so the fight went on.

Wandering in the higher part of the grounds one day, she looked over the wide lands lying at the foot of Carshalton in feudal peace, and asked herself yet another question: "Does all this make any difference?" The inward oracle gave none too clear an answer.

Oxonford strolled up then, and, looking at her shrewdly, said:

"Do you want to be alone?"

"I don't mind you," she answered.

"Well," said he, "how goes it?"

"It does n't go at all; it 's stuck fast."

Oxonford thrust his hands in his pockets and was silent.

"Do you think any one in this world," she asked, "is free from humbug?"

"No one," replied Oxonford firmly.

"I am glad of that," said Vera, "because I always used to think that I was; and now I'm beginning to be sure that I am not."

"And you want to sin in good company?"

"I don't want to be a prize humbug, anyway."

"What's all this coil about?"

"Look around you," said she, pointing east and west and south. "I have been asking myself a question,—'Does all this make any difference?'"

"Well?"

"Well, myself refused to answer."

"I can answer," said Oxonford coolly. "You would be a fool if it did n't make any difference, and Carshalton does n't want a female fool at the head of it. There are fools enough in the male line already."

"Then you think Carshalton wants me?"

He looked at her critically.

"I should say it did, but I may be mistaken. What are you prepared to do for it?"

"First and foremost," she said, "I should have a large family of beautiful sons and daughters."

"Great Scot!" cried Oxonford. "What a strange young woman you are!"

"I don't see it. Of course, if I marry, I intend to have children. What do you *think*?"

"I looked upon you," he replied humbly, "as the strong-minded woman."

"Hoo!" said Vera rudely. "I'm a woman all

the same—I wish I were not—and of course I shall do my share to keep the world going. Besides," she said, rather pathetically, "I shall be snuffed out some day, and I would like to leave something with possibilities behind me. Think of all the things one might do, if one had twenty lives instead of this paltry one. I feel it in me to be a great actress—tragic, of course,—a singer, an author, a painter of great pictures, a social reformer, a great religious stirrer-up (or rather puller-down), a champion swimmer and boxer, and a few other little things of that kind. Whereas——"

"Whereas?—" said Oxonford.

"Whereas," said she, "I'm just a rattling good swimmer and chauffeur and (I'm beginning to think) the only possible wife for a heaven-stricken, headstrong boy."

"There are lots would take him," said Oxonford, pointing to the view beneath them and looking hard at her.

"Yes, that's easy; but his wife must hold him. I could do it."

"How?"

"I've told you one way. He wants an heir—every Mandeville does. I could n't have such bad luck as not to have one!"

She stood up very straight and strong as she spoke; a capable mother of probable sons, it would seem.

"And the other way?" he asked.

"I can endure and be silent. I'm not sure that any one has the power to hurt me much. Anyway, they'll not be allowed to know it. Is n't that the sort of wife that Cedric wants?"

Oxford shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not sure that I should bother about what the cold-blooded young dog wants."

"Hoots, man! Have n't I told you until I'm out of breath that I'm fond of him?"

"I pity you," said Oxford, frowning.

"That is just my feeling for you," said Vera coolly. "You can't get what you want, and I can get what I want—oh yes, I can—but it will turn to dust and ashes in my hand. Where is the difference?"

"The advantage is with me," he declared, thinking with reverence of his lady.

Vera threw back her head and looked at him down her nose, through half-closed eyelids.

"What a pity it is," she said, "that we two are booked elsewhere. You and I were made for each other. The more I know of you the more I see it; but now it can never be."

"No, young Droylsden, it can never be," said Oxford, laughing.

Vera's face lightened into one of her rare smiles. Her queer green eyes grew very bright. This man understood her. They had left far behind them the time when he had been more

than half afraid of her cool recklessness. Hearing him laugh like that, she knew he was no longer "sitting on the fence."

"So you have got down on my side, after all," she said. He nodded.

"I did n't want to, but I had to."

"Thanks awfully," said she. "You are a friend worth having. I think I told you that before, but I shall not lean or cling. What Life brings me I can bear. Remember that."

"I will remember."

"But one thing you can do. Help to make Lady Carshalton like me."

"She likes you already, but she is too much a woman to own it."

He spoke truly enough. Lady Carshalton was terribly worried about Vera Droylsden. Honour was the lady's word. "I cannot think that my sons will ever hear the voice of Honour." It was for Oxonford to point out, quite delicately, that Miss Droylsden had been invited to Carshalton Court with the confessed purpose of getting Cedric to break his troth.

"But that was quite different!" said my lady.

"How different?"

"I cannot exactly say; but it was."

Oxonford smiled.

"Why then it surely was," he said. "We don't want Miss Droylsden to go now, do we?"

"I am like a child, Oxonford," said his adored lady. "I do not know what I want."

But that afternoon she called the girl into her bedroom and said:

"My dear, I think I heard you say something about your evening gown? Now don't contradict me. Jefferson shall make you one, the very prettiest possible. Jefferson has such perfect taste. And I shall help her design it. It will make me think that I have a daughter at last."

"Oh, dear Lady Carshalton," was all that Vera could say.

Vera's future had been hanging in the balance. The scales appeared now to be going down on the side of Carshalton. Later on in the evening, Lord Carshalton, gifted with sudden speech, summoned a family council in his rooms. Lady Carshalton came from her favourite drawing-room; Vera, Evelyn, and Oxonford (who had been dining at the Court), from the billiard-room; Nana from her own little suite. Hawkins reported that, for the moment, the twins could not be found. Lord Carshalton fumed at their absence, but, fearing the recurrent loss of speech, told plainly, though disconnectedly, what had been in his mind for many long inarticulate days.

It was a singular variation of his old cry, "The time is short." He had taken upon himself to play the prophet. His house, he made them understand, was threatened with calamity; him-

self likely to be left heirless; and so, sputtering violently over his fear of the title lapsing to the "cook's branch," he decided that Cedric should marry Vera Droylsden at once, and Ralph any girl—here his lordship looked malignly at Evelyn—who would be fool enough to have him. He went on to lash himself into a fury at the continued absence of his sons, until Oxonford said:

"All right, old man, all right. Tell him it's all right, Miss Droylsden."

"Yes, tell him Miss Droylsden dear," urged Nana; while Lady Carshalton laid her trembling hand on the girl's shoulder. And Vera, very white, knelt down before Carshalton and took his hands and said:

"My dear old boy, do be good! I swear to you it shall be done. Don't fret about the boys. You don't want to see them, you know. If I say it shall be done, it shall be. Squeeze my hands if you believe me; for really you must not talk any more."

He could not. He lay back exhausted, inarticulate, his eyes streaming with tears, which Vera gently wiped away.

When they had left him to the nurse again, Vera turned her dead-white face to Oxonford and drew him apart from the rest.

"Of course they have bolted," she said, speaking very low. "Had they money?"

"Their allowance fell due this morning," he

answered, "and they claimed it. It's an allowance more fit for princes than for a couple of such confounded young rips. Throw him over, Vera; he's not worthy of you."

"What have I just promised?" she said. "Go and find out what you can, there's a good fellow!"

Swearing softly, Oxonford went. It did not take him long to trace the twins. Immediately after dinner they had smuggled their luggage out of the house and had motored to Bedringham station in time to catch a late train to London. At their order a groom had accompanied them to bring the car back. Oxonford looked at his watch. The train would just be due in London. The twins had got clear away. In the heat of the moment Oxonford gave the frightened groom a month's notice, but Miss Droylsden's voice cut in:

"Steady, Mr. Oxonford."

"Don't you want him to be dismissed?" said Oxonford gruffly. "Then he can stay."

"And," he went on, when the man had gone, "if I could give you a month's notice from this place I would. It would save you from more than you know."

"I'm not worrying," said the girl. "What is there to worry about? Lady Carshalton must not be allowed to worry either. They just wanted a spree, and they'll come back none the worse."

But Oxonford was thinking of the human wreck upstairs, and of his lady's long martyrdom, and of the force of heredity. Well Vera Droylsden knew it.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DECENCIES OF LIFE

"WELL, I wonder how much longer we are to be grass widows, Eve," said Vera. "Is n't it farcical? Every time I look out of the window the servants think I am watching for him who cometh not. 'Sister Ann, do you see anything?' They are rather hurt that we eat our meals, but console themselves by thinking that we tear our hair in secret."

"Perhaps we do," said Evelyn, looking curiously at her friend.

"One thing I know," said Vera. "I'm tired of telling lies to Lord Carshalton. He will have to know soon that the boys have bolted."

"It is he will tear his hair then," said Evelyn. "He knows they inherit this kind of trick from him, and people never can bear to see their sins practised by other people. They want a monopoly of ill-doing, don't you think?"

"That's not the whole of it," said Vera. "People can't see themselves, you know. Is n't it rum that you carry your own face about with you from birth till death and never once see it?"

For the thing in the glass is n't *you*. And no mortal man can see his own deeds until he's drowning, or in a dead funk, or dying. Jolly lucky, perhaps."

"I think Lord Carshalton is near death, then," said Evelyn. "He knows only too well what he has done. Nana says he is beginning to say, 'The time is short,' again."

"Yes, he said it to me yesterday."

"And what did you say?"

"I said, 'My dear old pal, do you really find it so? It seems jolly long to me just now.'"

"Vera, how could you?"

"There's not much I can't do when I put my back into it."

"And what did he say then?"

"He laughed till he cried. It quite put him off the sermon tack. No doubt he had meant to ask me to read the Bible to him, but after that we got on to the *Sporting Times* instead."

"Oh, Vera—but do you think you really ought to? Because perhaps he is really trying to repent, you know."

"Piffle!" said Vera roughly. "If he's sorry, the Lord knows it right enough. You don't suppose the Almighty wants cant and long faces and sinners crawling round on their stomachs licking His feet? How we should loathe that sort of thing ourselves! It's just rank cowardice, that's all it is! Carshalton may repent for all

he's worth; I shall not try to stop him. But all that is left for him to do now is to bear bravely the misfortunes he has brought upon himself, and not to make himself too deuced unpleasant to those who have to bear them with him."

"You would never dare to tell him that."

"Would n't I? I have told him so lots of times in varied and elegant language (I believe I could write awfully fetching sermons). Only the other day he swore at the nurse and was going to throw his boots at her; and I said, 'Gently on; the Lord is looking at you!' He swore at me then; but that was different, because he knew I did n't mind. We understand each other!"

"I shall never understand you, Vera. I am beginning to think you are quite heartless. If Cedric and Ralph run away when we are married, shall you just go strolling around, making jokes as you do now?"

"I hope so," said the girl. "But we are not married yet. So you mean to have Ralph, Evelyn?"

"I don't know. It seems somehow as if I had to. Oh!" she cried, in genuine terror, "this is mother's carriage coming up the drive. She must have heard about the boys and has come to question me. Vera, what shall I say? What would Lady Carshalton wish me to say?"

But Lady Carshalton had seen that carriage too, and was stirred to an unwonted stroke of

diplomacy. She came into the room quite quickly, with a pink flush on her cheeks, and said:

"Vera, I want you at once in my boudoir. You too, Evelyn."

And the boudoir bell was rung, and in a trice Jefferson was there with the prettiest evening gown in her arms; and Lady Carshalton herself was undoing Vera's blouse when Hawkins came to announce, "Mrs. Manners, my lady. She is in the small drawing-room."

"Yes, I will see her," said Lady Carshalton, peering through the door. "Ask her up here, please. And, Hawkins, don't hurry too much. Now, Jefferson, quick!"

It was a transformed Vera that Mrs. Manners saw on entering the room; for Jefferson was indeed an artist. The gown was pure white: classically simple, as a young girl's gown should be, yet so subtle in cut and long in line as to redeem each fault of over-massiveness. The girl seemed taller than before and merely plump in proportion: a large, gracious model of vital womanhood. And Vera's matchless complexion and bright, plainly-dressed hair rose triumphant from the dead whiteness. Something in her bearing, too, as she stood very still under Jefferson's fingers made Jefferson say generously:

"Miss Droylsden becomes the gown, my lady, even better than the gown becomes her."

Lady Carshalton glanced at the girl with a

troubled comprehension. She had but vague memories of classic tales; but here, it seemed, was a woman dressed for sacrifice. What Mrs. Manners said, as she entered the room, was:

"Dear me! Quite bridal! Is it really Miss Droylsden?"

The flush on Lady Carshalton's cheek deepened. Something had stirred her so to battle for the honour of the House, as she had never dared do it before. Instinctively the girls knew that she had planned this little scene to shield her sons—and her daughters.

"That is what people call her at present," she answered lightly. "Dear Mrs. Manners, excuse my informality in asking you to come up here, but we have always been such friends. I feel our interests are yours. And just now we think and dream of possible frocks and frills for Vera. She has no mother to help her, as this dear child has."

As she spoke she laid her hand on Evelyn's shoulder.

"Ah, what will not mothers do for their children!" Mrs. Manners exclaimed.

Apparently the maternal service demanded of the lady now was that she should pretend to be an amiable simpleton: she therefore nobly adopted the rôle at once. She had heard the truth—and much more than the truth—about the flight of the twins; but diplomacy demanded that she

should appear to be deceived by Lady Carshalton's obvious manœuvring. To strike at Vera Droylsden with cool malice would have been sweet; but for this pleasure she must not risk the loss of Ralph. So she went into ecstasies over the gown; threw in the word "trousseau" as an arch suggestion; and hinted adroitly that the county set down a special license as the object of dear Cedric's visit to London.

"They said Lord Carshalton's health was suddenly worse; but I inquired at the lodge before venturing to drive in, and was relieved to find that it was not so."

"He is no worse," said Lady Carshalton, "but he is bent upon Cedric's immediate marriage. No, I do not think there has been question of a special license. Are they possible in cases of minority? I am shockingly ignorant. But there are many little details of business to be arranged, and Carshalton is quite unable to see the family lawyers; so——"

She paused as she came to the lie direct, smoothing down an already perfect fold of Vera's skirt; and Mrs. Manners rushed to the rescue.

"So the dear boys have gone? I see! They are so talented and so old for their years that they can quite well be trusted to do their business most ably, I am sure."

Evelyn's satirical smile, which broke out at this moment, was an indecorum immediately

frowned down by her mother. It argued a reprehensible knowledge of the probable doings of the escaped twins: a knowledge gained, no doubt, from the dreadful Droylsden girl, who stood there, in her triumphant finery, evidently not caring a pin. The disgraceful minx clearly meant to marry Mottisfont, disdaining the cost. Mrs. Manners would have given much to have been able to remove her daughter from Vera Droylsden's influence, so that Evelyn might marry Ralph in due and proper virginal innocence. To marry him was quite desirable: to have eyes wide open upon the risks she ran was sheer immodesty in so young a girl. After the manner of parents from time immemorial, Mrs. Manners wondered what the world was coming to.

She expressed this wonder to Evelyn, who took her to her carriage; and Evelyn said:

"I wish you would not say things like that! They sound so old!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Mrs. Manners angrily.

"I mean what I say," was the weary answer.

"I don't know what has come to you," cried her mother. "You would never have dared to speak to me like that before you knew Vera Droylsden."

"It is n't that," said Evelyn. "You know mother, if I marry, you can't keep control over me. It will be an emancipation, for Ralph will

not care what I do. Cedric is his one beloved. I suppose you still want me to marry Ralph?"

They were on the steps leading down from the terrace. As she spoke Evelyn paused and looked up at her mother with a kind of wistfulness. It seemed as if she prayed to be saved from herself; but Mrs. Manners bent her elaborate head and kissed her daughter in a sudden gush of thanksgiving. The coachman, sitting in rigid decorum below, saw the action out of the tail of his eye; and afterwards added up two and two, and winked vulgarly and said they made four.

"My dearest child," Mrs. Manners said, "you mean to make me happy and to repay me for all the sacrifices I have made for you. I see it in your face. It will be a splendid match for you, since the other was not to be. The girls shall be your bridesmaids, unless dear Lord Carshalton's health demands a quiet wedding. Your father will be so delighted!"

"Poor little father!" said Evelyn softly

Mrs. Manners glanced sharply at her daughter.

"But I shall tell him nothing until it is all quite arranged," she said. "The dear boys will soon have finished their business in London; and when they come home, I shall expect news of you, dear child."

"Yes, they will quite soon finish their business," Evelyn said. "Cedric is easily tired. Now, mother, I think you must go. Of course every

one here knows what we are planning, but for decency's sake we will go on pretending that they do not. That is only good breeding, is n't it? You see how well you have trained me. Good-bye mother."

She shut the carriage door and turned away without offering to kiss her mother; and Mrs. Manners, as she drove home, had a vision—prophetic and unpleasing—of the outsider she herself was destined to be at Carshalton Court. The old Evelyn, evading her, demurely outwitting her, deftly slipping from her grasp, had even thus owned her sway. This was a new Evelyn, who, in obeying her, made contemptuous escape from control. Mrs. Manners sighed as she leaned back on the cushions; then consoled herself by meditation on her own so righteous and successful diplomacy. Not a twinge of conscience was hers. It seemed to her that she had done all things well. That is the very full excuse for those mothers who sell their daughters. And perhaps, after all, a certain very mad philosopher knew what he was talking about when he said: "If man would no longer think himself wicked, he would cease to be so."

CHAPTER XXII

CARSHALTON'S SECOND SIGHT

A PERFECT autumn day. The fleecy clouds hung high above the earth, giving great space for mortal aspiration; the leaves were beginning to flame and loosen on their stems; the little rabbits in the park sat up warily, sniffing the keeper's gun, then scuttered away in the thick bronze of the bracken; flocks of migrant birds collected on fence and wire to twitter fussily of exile; thin streams of smoke hung in the air from twitch-fire and steam-plough, while hungry, cawing rooks followed the opening furrow. Oxonford, stalking the wary partridge alone—as he loved to do—and warmed to keen zest of life by the sport of it, and the ineffable sharp nectar of the air, muttered to himself, “Hang it all! What can they find in the sink-hole of London to compare with this?”

Oxonford had asked “Young Droylsden” to try her hand at shooting with him; but she had refused. Home-sickness is rife in autumn, when the year, like the past, is slipping away; dying under the thin disguise of beauty. And nostalgia

for Bruin had seized upon Vera; so that she longed for the coming of the twins to release her for a time from Carshalton. There was the desire, also, to know the worst: to live quickly through the inevitable, awkward meeting. So this autumn day she hung about, watching like a wistful dog; until Lady Carshalton's heart ached for her and she laid down her arms for ever at the girl's feet.

It happened that the two women were together when Hawkins brought a telegram. Lady Carshalton paled, and fingered the brown envelope, and finally gave it to Vera to open. The girl laughed as she read the message.

"They are not dead," she said. "They only want something. *Please send car to meet the 12.15 at Bedrington.—Cedric.* Well, of all the cool cheek!"

"I shall not send it," said Lady Carshalton, flushing. "Let them come home and beg our pardon first before they give their orders!"

"They will never do that," said Vera quickly; then stopped short, glancing at Hawkins.

"You need not mind Hawkins," said the elder woman bitterly. "He knows more than you can tell him. He has not lived here all these years for nothing. Nana and Hawkins are our friends, if we have any friends at all."

"Whatever you wish shall be done, my lady," the old butler said tremulously.

"What do you wish, Vera?" Lady Carshalton asked, her eyes filling with tears.

"I think," said Vera slowly, "that I will drive the car to meet them myself. That will take the wind out of the county."

"My dear child," said Lady Carshalton, "that is the very last thing that you should do."

"I don't see it," replied Vera. "I think it is just the one and only thing to be done. Look here, Lady Carshalton. The boys are prodigal sons, and they know they are; but they are not going to be repentant, anyhow. The more they have gone the pace, the less will they repent; because they have only done what they wanted to do, and their own will is the only law they know. It's a double will too: remember that; and not a scrap of conscience between them. Each is answerable to the other, that is all; and the mischief is that they think alike. Oh, I know them through and through. They're a pair of young devils in double harness: you can't drive them on a curb rein. In fact, you can't really drive them at all. If you want to keep in with them, you must just sit in the cart and go where they like to take you. Then perhaps they'll have the goodness not to kick the cart to pieces, 'because you've been such a brick, Vera, don't you know!'"

My lady smiled through her tears at the con-

cluding words, given in Cedric's own rather insolent drawl, and said:

"I am not sure that I understand your reasons; but I know that you love Cedric."

"I'm not exactly thinking of him," said Vera, "but of myself. If I tore my hair and cried, he would hate me for ever. No, I shall just not turn a hair. If he likes to say his say, I'll have mine too: my English is plain enough, you know. But I'll just meet those two young rascals and show them how a woman can keep cool. It will make them skulk, if anything will. The strong are in the right of it always. You see it all the world over."

Then suddenly she bent and kissed Lady Carshalton's hand.

"Don't look like that," she cried. "It's all different for you. Your weakness is your strength: any one who is any good at all loves you for it. But I'm not picturesque like you, you know. I'm a barbarian, and must just fight things out in my own rough way."

"Order the car, Hawkins," said my lady, rising and wiping her eyes.

So when Cedric and Ralph arrived at Bedrington, armed to the teeth against remonstrance, they found Vera sitting coolly in the car outside the station.

"Hello!" she sang out; and the boys could only answer, "Hello!" The wind was all out of

their sails. For an instant they stared at Vera; and then Cedric burst out laughing. Vera's green eyes were very bright; her unwilling smile played round her mouth; it was pleasant to hold the culprits for a moment at her mercy.

"Don't fool about," she said shortly. "Swarm up. You 'd better sit behind, Cedric. There's a nip in the wind."

She threw him a rug, and he knew that her casual glance had seen the utter wreck he was.

"Wrap it well round you," she said. "Are you right?"

And off they went at an amazing speed.

"What about police traps?" said Ralph, trying to get the upper hand.

"Hoo!" was Vera's only answer. "Had a jolly time?"

"Ripping," Ralph said.

"Short but complete, eh? *You* look well at the end of it, anyhow."

Ralph grunted angrily.

"I 'd give him half my strength if I could," he said; and with a pang Vera realised that if Ralph had tempted Cedric to run, it was Ralph who had cajoled him back.

"Oh, I 'm not going to rub it in," she answered, driving ahead in her masterly way.

So they were brought home feeling more like whipped schoolboys than ever before in their

lives. It would have seemed easy to swagger into an antagonistic household: it was infinitely harder to creep in behind the sheltering skirts of a woman.

As they came up the drive, an eager, haggard figure appeared at one of the upper windows; and Vera kissed her hand to it.

"Lord Carshalton does not know you have been away," she said. "We have lied to him quite successfully. He's dying to get hold of you. Poor old boy! His head is full of strange fancies. But you'll see!"

Hawkins, dignified and imperturbable, was at the door; and Nana came trembling down the great staircase and kissed both boys and held up hands of horror at Cedric, who laughed at her and asked:

"What's the betting, Nana? Do you give me six months to live?"

Lady Carshalton and Evelyn appeared first at luncheon, when Lady Carshalton was miserably nervous and Evelyn so artfully polite that Ralph, who could ill endure this kind of baiting, began to wonder, after the manner of men from the world's beginning, what he had ever seen to admire in her. By the time the meal was ended both boys were thoroughly restive; so that Vera sought out Evelyn and uttered dark prophecy:

"They'll save the situation by flatly refusing to marry us!"

"Oh," cried Evelyn, with a theatrical scream. "Mother will certainly beat me."

Then with real feeling she added: "But you, Vera?"

"Never mind about me, you good little thing," said the other girl. "I'm in a deuce of a fog: don't know which way I want to go. If you forced me to pray, it could only be for light, and that's bound to come in the end, you know."

"Do you think so? Why?"

"I go by nature. Every night ends."

"Often in a bitter day."

"Yes, but still day," Vera answered. And Evelyn wondered, and said:

"I wish I loved Ralph as you love Cedric. There would be some zest in it then."

Soon came down word from Lord Carshalton that he must see the twins at once. He had sent the nurse away; and he rose tottering as his sons entered, his eyes brilliant and restless in his sunken face, his right leg dragging, his speech halting, a flickering intellect inspiring the body so terribly worn by the mortal disease of sin. A parody of a man he looked, yet with a man's intense longing fixed still on things of earth. His glance passed by Ralph's sullen vigour and fixed itself upon Cedric. And as the son arraigned his father for a self-inflicted doom, so the father prophetically arraigned the son, the bitter fact of heredity lying between them: completest

manifestation of the antagonism of the generations. "This, my son, will do all that I have proved evil," was the inmost cry of the one. "This, my father, gave me my nature," thought the other.

Then, haltingly, Carshalton preached his sermon. "Time is short; death is very near for you and me; and"—oh, little climax!—"the man whom I despise shall not inherit. He shall not, I say, inherit!" That was the gist of it.

The brothers had heard from infancy of the Carshalton gift of second sight: a legend as dear to the family as were its ghosts and its historic criminals. They listened in silence: Cedric with a certain stony pity for the poor preacher and a high disdain of his own fate; Ralph, always hotter in spirit, with a real terror of what might touch his twin beloved. Inevitably their looks met: soul reading soul.

"Of course it's all nonsense, old man," said Ralph, laying a hand on Cedric's arm.

"We can die but once," said Cedric, shrugging his shoulders. "But what's the good of fussing? I'm going to marry Vera—a year or so sooner, what does it matter?"

"And I?" asked Ralph.

"The governor has mapped it all out," replied Cedric. "You and Evelyn are to come in as the second string to his fiddle. We're all to live here—the whole four of us. Well, old fellow,

why not? The girls are fond of each other, you know!"

And so Carshalton's bell was rung again to summon the girls to a strange betrothal scene. Carshalton, trembling with excitement, put Vera's hand in Cedric's; and then, in impotent anger, found that his tongue had once more failed him. Tears of rage rose to his eyes; and Vera, full of compassion, said clearly, "Cedric, I promise to take you"; then felt her heart die within her at sight of Cedric, who was staring at his father with a critical pity more cruel than contempt. Carshalton made eager signs to Ralph and Evelyn, and Evelyn, half in terror, half in coquetry, whispered:

"You 've never asked me, Ralph."

"I ask you now," he said hastily, holding out his hand; and Evelyn, with a dramatic glance at Vera, laid hers in it and said, "I'll marry you, Ralph." Then she rushed away to her room, flung herself on the bed, and cried as she had not cried since childhood.

Vera did not follow her. Carshalton's pitiful, tragic figure held her imagination; revealing, with almost indecent clearness, the doom that walks in every man's shadow. For a weak moment she wondered why any one should ever trouble to do anything: all men living as they did at the pit's mouth, liable every instant to be engulfed. Gloomily she made her way to the library and

stood with her hands behind her, staring out of the window. Cedric was drawn to follow her. He had never seen her thus shaken; and the weakness of the strong girl was curiously moving. He threw himself into an easy chair and wondered when the deuce she would speak again. The very silence seemed to cry out. Instinctively he knew that Vera was fighting her fate over there by the window.

"I can't hunt, or shoot, or play football, or even hockey, Vera," he said at last. "A fellow must take it out somehow."

Vera was touched. She sought for some form of appeal that would not hurt him.

"Cedric," she said, "quite apart from what is good for you, you have Ralph in your care now."

"Ralph is strong," he answered. "A little racketing won't hurt him."

"It hurt Lord Carshalton. How old is he really? He might be eighty-eight in constitution."

"The poor old governor never knew where to stop," said Cedric loftily. "I shall not let Ralph get like that. I shall know when to put the curb on."

This dallying with destruction was appalling to Vera; yet it seemed hopeless to touch upon the moral side of the question with a nature morally irresponsible. So she said:

"Cedric, you know I'm not a prude. Could you tell me all that you have done in London?"

He looked at her restively.

"No," he answered, "I could n't. That is to say, I should not tell you if I meant to marry you afterwards."

"Cæsar's wife—is that it?"

"That 's it. You never were dull, Vera."

"No, I'm not dull," she burst out. "I have not that compensation."

Looking out of the window again she saw the whole great landscape blurred by a misty autumn rain. Colour and form were gone; the leaden clouds pressed low upon dark, dull chaos. Earth, so bright in the morning, flashing back answers to the sun from flower and tree and water and glittering pebble and call of bird and beast, lay now in sullen silence: blank of question to a heaven whose gates of light were shut. What an immeasurable metamorphosis! Intolerable to the girl, smothering, as it did, her youth's wild cry for help with the answer, "There is no help anywhere." Yet even as she used the word intolerable, her strength rose up to reject it. "What Life brings me I can bear," she had said; and she was but at the beginning of endurance yet. Fighting down her pain, she took the question of her life to a higher court, asking, "What is the right thing to do?" For the promise given before Lord Carshalton had become—even as she

spoke it—a small thing in comparison with this casting of her woman's nature—that pearl without price—before swine. To be held lightly is an incurable wound to a woman's honour, and a base self-sacrifice has no appeal to the noble. Struggling, fighting in a chaos of darkness, crying out in her heart that she was caught in a maze of circumstance—no way entirely right—Vera forgot that Cedric was in the room, until a little unaccustomed sound struck upon her ear.

It was not a cry, not a groan, but rather a child's small hurt moaning. Vera turned and saw Cedric lying back in his chair deathly white, his brows drawn in the angry line of pain she knew so well. She ran for brandy, and, as she bent over him, knew by the taut pull of her heart-strings that all her questionings were answered. The darkness of the day fell away from her, drowned in the flooding light of a love that was more than half maternal. If she had been the woman appointed to bear this lost, misguided son, could she have committed the crime of deserting him? A thousand times no! That higher crown of suffering was denied her, but she would bear with his sins and his waywardness and with his infirmities of mind and body, and would hold him fast to the end by the very freedom which she would give him to follow the inexorable driving of his inherited nature. It was the only way.

Very slowly Cedric came back to life, and, opening his dark, pain-dimmed eyes upon her, said querulously:

"Why don't you say, 'I told you so?'"

"What's the good?" answered she. "Here, don't gas, man, but lap up the rest of this."

He drank the brandy; and presently sat upright and said:

"I believe you are the only woman in England who would n't have had the whole house buzzing round me. You are a trump, Vera."

"Is that all?" said she, a little wistfulness of love escaping her.

"You are the only woman I could bear to marry," he answered brokenly. "I'm a rotten chap, Vera. Any other woman would drive me straight to the devil, world without end, Amen. You see what the poor old governor is harping upon. He thinks Ralph and I are done for. Are you afraid to marry me?"

"Have you ever seen me afraid?" asked Vera.

Then she knelt down and laid her head on his knee and said:

"I love you, old boy, because I can't help it. Be as good as you can. I shall never ask you again."

Cedric stroked her hair for a moment with his frail hand and said:

"You're one of the best, Vera. Don't think I don't know it. And what ripping hair you've

got, old girl! You won't tell Ralph I was bowled over? It would hurt him, don't you know."

"I won't tell him. Honour bright!"

And presently Vera went away to her own room and rehearsed this little scene again and again, until it was engraved upon her heart. It was not much; but it was enough. Cedric was not inhuman: he had appealed to her for help. Many a woman's faith lies rooted in less of a revelation than this.

When the dull afternoon was closing in a dim, calm evening, Vera sought and found Nana.

"Well, Miss Droylsden dear?" said the old woman eagerly.

"It's well enough," agreed Vera, strolling about the room.

"Then you are to marry him?"

"It seems so."

"May I tell my lady?"

"I suppose so."

"Thank the Lord!" ejaculated Nana.

"What for?"

The old woman peered at Vera through the dimness.

"Miss Droylsden, I don't pretend to work it all out clear," she said. "Here are we, my lady and I and half the county, despising Mrs. Manners for thrusting Miss Evelyn into Mr. Ralph's arms; and yet we thank the Lord that you are to marry Lord Mottisfont. I don't pretend to work it all

out clear, but so it is. Ah, we're but selfish bits of clay, the best of us!"

"Oh, well," said Vera, "if you please yourself, you are sure of pleasing one person, anyway. That's my philosophy of life."

Nana shook her head.

"I can tell you something better than that; but you know it already, or I'm greatly mistaken. Christ came to redeem the world, my dear young lady, but not from suffering, not from suffering!"

"Now don't preach, Nana. I'm not in the mood for it. And look here! Don't imagine that I'm marrying Cedric to oblige Lord Carshalton. I think Carshalton has got upon your brain with his cry, 'The time is short.' What does he just mean by it? It is n't quite the old religious craze, is it?"

"No, no," said Nana. "He's got the second sight. They have it—the Mandevilles—when they're stricken. Ah me! Ah me! My boys! I'll be glad when I dandle the next heir safe in my old arms."

"Piffle!" cried Vera. "You have lived too long in this God-forsaken old place, with its ghost-banged doors and creepy corridors and dark tapestries, and a family skeleton sticking out of every cupboard. I shall go home next week and scratch up a trousseau, and yap to my dear old Bruin and the boys; and then I'll bring a breath of fresh air back with me—see if I don't!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PASSING OF BRUIN

"IT'S the unexpected that always happens," said Vera to herself as she strode in at the gate of the Cedar House at the falling of the early October twilight, and felt the grip of home about her heart. "I'm the unexpected this time. I wonder what they'll say."

She found Bruin sitting by firelight in his study, with rather more than the usual chaos of papers on the table and a sheaf of notes—studies for his book—in his hands. Yet it was not of his book that he was thinking. As Vera opened the door she caught his wistful look: as of one who waits, hardly hoping that what he looks for will come to him. The change in his face when he saw his girl told of hope's almost too sudden fulfilment: the joy that is close on pain. It struck to her heart, and brought her, kneeling, to his feet, when a stronger, more lingering touch than Cedric's caressed her bright hair.

"I've stayed away too long, Bruin, have I? And now I'm going again soon, my dear old man. You have a bad daughter."

"Going soon?" he said. "Tell me all about it."

He listened to her tale in silence; not thanking the Lord like Nana, and yet Vera felt that he was relieved.

"Is it an ambitious Bruin, after all?" she asked, wondering.

"No," said Mr. Droylsden. "But we mortals pine for certainty—chiefly, I imagine, because it ever escapes us. At least my girl will never want for money."

"We have never bothered about money, Bruin. We're not going to begin now. So long as we can just jog along, we're quite happy, eh?"

"Quite happy," he answered; and muttered again, "My girl is provided for."

She stirred the fire into a blaze and looked at him critically, but saw no change in him. Just the same tumble-haired, kindly, dreamy old Bruin, whose very wrinkles expressed the just strivings of his soul.

"You will have Lady Carshalton, Vera," he added. "I am easier in my mind since I saw her. A kind and gentle lady! And you will make her happier, too, my child."

Vera, with her arm on Bruin's knee, stared into the fire and thought of George Oxonford, and wondered whether Bruin could ever be brought to understand the idyll of the lady and her knight. She decided he could not, and that the mind-

picture he had made of Lady Carshalton was truer to life than any which could be conjured up by the whole truth, as filtered through his elderly masculine mind. So she left him in peaceful ignorance; sparing him, as the young, who are supposed to be crassly ignorant, quite often spare the old. And then she went over her own tale again, filling in the details, but with no word of the boys' London escapade. The reticent loyalty of the married woman was beginning to possess her; and, away from Carshalton, also, and its figure of living prophetic doom, she could begin to think more lightly of the affair, as a boyish freak, not to be repeated. But everything else she told; drawing pity for Carshalton and his dread of some fatality threatening his race. Bruin's hopefulness on this point was cheering. He quelled the power of second sight with the magic word, "Pooh!"

"Of course I don't really believe in it myself," said Vera; "only that kind of thing seems to fit into Carshalton Court, and it's hard to stand up against it there. It's no kind of use, anyway," she concluded. "If bad things are going to happen, I'd rather not know it. I can meet them when they come."

"Is that what you really feel, Vera?"

"Yes," she answered, looking up at him. "Why not? Take things as they come, don't you know!"

"Yes, why not?" he murmured dreamily. "And how long are you to be here, Vera?"

"Well, I think the wedding is to be in about a month, if Evelyn can get her togs together. She's dead nuts on good clothes. Lady Carshalton is playing up awfully well about mine. Jefferson is on to my frocks already, and she's to come here in about a week to fit them on. We're to be married by special licence in one of the Carshalton drawing-rooms, if you don't mind, Bruin; because Lord Carshalton wants to see it safely done, and they can't risk taking him to church. I want to be married in my travelling things—thick white serge coat and skirt—but perhaps I shan't be able to, because Evelyn's keen on a real wedding-gown of white chiffon and silver. But I tell her I'll be a foil to throw her up; and Cedric hates fal-lals. What do you think?"

Bruin could not give an opinion. The subject was beyond him.

"But Lady Carshalton must not pay for your clothes," he said.

"Does it matter?" asked Vera. "Oh, well, you fight it out with her, there's a good Bruin! She's going to send Mr. Oxonford to talk to you about the settlement. I won't tell you what Lord Carshalton thinks of doing, but it's rather magnificent. Lady Carshalton was afraid he was not legally competent, but the lawyers say it's all right. He can sign his name, if they take him

in a good moment. And, Bruin dear, we won't refuse that settlement, because——"

"Because—?" said Bruin, looking down at her with his kind, keen eyes.

"It may be the saving of my children some day," said Vera steadily; and the shadow of far-away Carshalton fell upon the father, who would not for worlds have sent his girl to sacrifice. But another shadow was upon Bruin, obscuring his vision. He let the warning pass.

Presently Vera ranged through the whole household. Every one welcomed her: Aunt Eva with tears. In this way Aunt Eva greeted all the events of life; but her tears meant no more than the smiles of other people. A soft, good-hearted creature, bent on the comfort of those with whom she lived. Bruin had not been neglected; yet Vera, remembering the look she had surprised on his face, felt little pangs of conscience. This good Bruin: she had thought of him often during her absence; and yet she had stayed away.

Vera found the boys in Alfred Seaton's study. La Bercée was roasting chestnuts, and Seaton himself was daintily making toffee in an enamelled saucepan. He had spread a newspaper on the table; and on it were patty-pans, ready greased, and a plate of roasted nuts to give flavour to the concoction. The other boys were in classic attitudes of ease and meditation. "Here's a

sweet, innocent scene!" said Vera, strolling forward into the firelight. "I want to be an angel! Dear, good little fellows! I see you have been writing your copy-books quite nicely and following their maxims. Well, mother's come home again to her boys. Hello, who's this?"

It was a boy called Crawford, who had taken Cedric's place. For a few minutes he was rather shy of this queer Miss Droylsden; then yielded to the charm of her frankness. And Vera, sitting down in the midst of her boys, chaffing them and eating quantities of little Alfred's toffee, said to herself, "It's good to be at home again, and it's all just the same." But she knew—and Alfred Seaton knew—that it was all very different. He said to her that night:

"Of course you need n't tell me that this is absolutely your last appearance. The savour of all last things is in the air. How long do you give us, Vera?"

"About a month," she answered.

The young fellow looked at her earnestly.

"Have you considered?" he said.

"Everything," she answered.

"And it is for your happiness?"

"It is my destiny."

"And for your happiness?"

"I could not be happy otherwise. I could not go back."

"No, there's no going back in life," answered

Seaton; and the speech on his young lips made her smile.

He was not dense. He read that smile of hers.

"We are the same age, you and I," he asserted.

"We may have been when I went away. But, my good boy, I'm old enough to be your mother now."

"Then you are too old for Mottisfont," he said quizzically; and the look in Vera's eyes gave him his final answer. It was the look maternal that came at the mention of Cedric; and the deep-hearted woman who loves her lover maternally will never leave him. Alfred Seaton, youthful poet and philosopher, knew this well enough.

"Ah, well," he said, speaking lightly, "whatever happens, in this world or the next I'm yours to command. What's the next move in the game, Vera?"

"Lady Carshalton's maid and my togs. They're to arrive together next week. How funny it will be to have Jefferson here!"

But it was no stranger than all the rest. Jefferson behaved beautifully. She never forgot to see her lady's successor in Miss Droylsden; and was pleased to approve Mr. Droylsden's scholarly and absent-minded courtesy, as fitting him in some measure for the Carshalton connection. She was respectful to Aunt Eva, who was quite evidently afraid of her; and she patronised the servants so imperceptibly that they were flattered,

as by a great lady's condescension. Firmly but gently Jefferson would swoop down upon Vera—who was bent upon enjoying this last freedom of the old life—and would carry her away to the little room set apart for trousseau work, and there would model every day some fresh loveliness to her figure. Alfred Seaton was not slow to insinuate himself as a connoisseur of the beautiful; and mightily enjoyed the contrast between the maid's prim English and Vera's familiar slang. Jefferson's solemnity would relax into softness for Mr. Seaton, who called her "Miss Jefferson," and whose exaggerated air of respect was found amusing enough in an Honourable. Alfred, the worldly-wise, had his reasons for allowing her to suspect his own devotion to Vera, and good reasons they were. Jefferson—best of maids—conceived a real respect for Miss Droylsden, who had yet another high-born one at her feet.

The wedding-gown was a triumph of Jefferson's art. White and silver it had to be—Evelyn's choice for the pair of brides; and one day Vera stood up tall and serious, veiled in filminess, which clung here, floated there, to receive her court of boys; having for a background the passing autumn sunshine and the dark immutability of the cedar tree without—type of the high Eternal. The boys came in, laughing and chaffing at first; but even La Bercée's awestruck, "*Mon Dieu, qu'elle est belle!*" could not make Vera smile. Something

gripped her at the heart, and Seaton's words echoed in her brain: "The savour of all last things is in the air." Her eyes met his with their first look of fear; and, on a sob, like a child, she said, "I must go to Bruin."

They parted to let her pass. Hesitatingly they followed, respecting her train; then half-way to Bruin's study they paused, and Vera went in alone. The boys knew Bruin's ways. He would look up, keeping his finger on his place in book or notes, with a kindly, "Well, my girl?"

But Bruin did not look up; and instead of his voice there came out to them a half-articulate cry. Some instinct told Seaton the truth. The picture of what he would find was flashed upon his sight before he passed the study door. Vera was bending over her father, loosening his collar and propping up that fallen head. La Bercée ran for a doctor; but none was needed. They carried Bruin to his room and laid him on the bed. His soul was with God; but there was still something the women could do for his poor mortal body. It was Jefferson who helped Vera reverently in these last poor services of love; Jefferson who cried out, weeping, that the wrinkles had gone from his face; Jefferson who took off the girl's wedding-gown and asked if she had any black clothes, and tried to make her cry. Vera kissed the kind woman and stole away alone to Bruin's study.

The manuscripts that were to have opened the eyes of the blind were strewn over the study table. His girl fingered them tenderly, thinking, in her sudden loneliness, that his eyes were finally open now upon something higher than the vain endeavours, the elusive knowledge, of this world. Bruin had been but at school here below, she tried to think; struggling hard against that ever-assailing, soul-weakening verdict of the king who was just not wise enough, "All is vanity!" Not for her beloved one was that the epitaph. Humble, diligent scholar, he had left his task unfinished, and was at rest for ever in the knowledge of the All-knowing. And his work on earth should not be wasted, though consecrated to other ends than those of which he had dreamed. His daughter fell on her knees and, with her face on the loved handwriting, prayed that she too might fight on, uncomplaining, to the last.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DOUBLE WEDDING

THE blinds were up at the Cedar House, and Bruin was gone. Oxonford and Cedric, who had attended the funeral and had been very gentle with Vera, were gone too. The boys were going: their things were packed, and they came to say good-bye to Vera, who felt, in the dull, inevitable descent from the most sacred heights of grief, that all her world was slipping away from her.

"Good-bye, my pups," said she, keeping her head up and smiling bravely.

Her courage struck them hard. La Bercée, unashamed of his wet eyes, kissed her, saying. "*Pauvrette!*" and this was too much for her self-control. But she smiled at him through the first tears she had been seen to shed, and patted his brush-like head and called him her good faithful dog. Alfred Seaton's farewell seemed curt and cool. She surprised herself dwelling painfully upon it in the silent house. Slowly the afternoon wore away. Aunt Eva had taken all domestic duties off Vera's hands, and Jefferson, who had

turned out black garments for the funeral, was at work, with sphinx-like face, upon some dainty unfinished whiteness.

"What's the good of going on, Jefferson?" said Vera; and the maid replied:

"Well, miss, I may as well do this as nothing."

Vera looked at her keenly.

"Has Lady Carshalton written to you?" she asked.

"I heard from Nana this morning, miss."

There was a pause, in which Vera drummed with her fingers upon the window-pane. Then the maid rose and fetched Nana's letter. Reading it, Vera felt a stubborn unreadiness for the affairs of life: the bereaved heart's tribute to the dead: "Oh, may I never go on and forget!" She knew it for a weakness: one which she had no desire to conquer. The dear past had removed itself; and in the ache of this thought she was deaf to the cry of the world. The tragic figure of Carshalton, praying for the fulfilment of one last insistent desire, was swept too far away to touch her to anything but revulsion from the uses to which he called her. Without a word to Jefferson, she laid the letter down and went away to Bruin's study. A little root of bitterness, foreign to her nature, had sprung up within her. "Shall I leave Bruin alone, as I am left? I cannot, I will not, do it!" Even as she turned the handle of the study door, the solemn answer came to her:

"He is not here, he is risen!" Through the tears that rose at this chastening voice the familiar room swam before her eyes. When the mist cleared away she saw Alfred Seaton writing at a little table by the window. The revulsion from utter loneliness was too great. In the flood of tears that followed, that bad little root of bitterness was for ever swept away. Seaton waited patiently to let her speak first. It was the old Vera's voice that said:

"How did you know I wanted you so badly?"

"Fools—and animals—have instincts," he replied, fingering daintily something that he had written. Vera bent to read it.

"There is no man so bereaved but the living still call to him, if he will only hear. We hold our dead by the hand, and would fain stay by them always; but they are taken away. And then, if we are to be anything more than coward dreamers, we must draw up the blinds and go back to life again, with a memory safe in our hearts to make us more tender to all the suffering world."

"That's little Alfred's own English," said Vera, rather tremulously. "Is it his own philosophy too?"

"It is my philosophy for the moment."

"So young, and yet so cautious!" said she.

"I would not swear that there was anything I would not do before I died," he declared.

"That leaves the path of Fame open?" she said.

"And the broad road of Sin."

"And the narrow one of Virtue."

"Yes, the narrow one of Virtue too, Vera. You have learned your Latin roots. Virtue is strength, you know."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Have you anything else to tell me?"

He took a book from the shelves—one revered of Bruin—and pointed out the classic dialogue between the living and the dying friends: "Is it a comfort that I shall often come and weep over you?"—"Not unless I be aware and hear you weeping."

"But that was a pagan end," said Vera, defending her last outworks.

"Who pencil-marked the passage?" was Seaton's relentless answer.

It was thus that he brought her back to an understanding with herself and set her feet once more on the road of life; and then, like all counsellors of wisdom, he had to stand aside and watch her work out her own salvation. To him "damnation" seemed the more descriptive word; but he summoned all his philosophy to think that what Vera Droylsden—in her sane mind—decided to do was the highest within her power, and that the road thus chosen must be the one appointed for her to follow. It led her from him

and set her at the mercy of all Carshalton. "Think of others," he had said to her; and she thought of Lord Carshalton holding out pitiful hands to her, writing his pitiful little letters—hardly to be deciphered, yet clear enough in their entreaty; of Lady Carshalton, the kind, the gentle, who said at last, "I want a daughter, Vera"; of Cedric, doom-threatened (as she began to think), cut off from his kind by the inherent coldness of his nature—her poor spoilt boy. Only she could dare to love him. And as in a dream, hardly knowing that she had consented, she saw the preparations for the wedding going on, and herself helped in them.

Oxford came and stayed a day or two at the Hare and Hounds and showed her an elder-brotherly kindness. Bruin had left but little property, it appeared; and all agreed that this should go to make Aunt Eva comfortable. Vera's marriage settlement was one for a princess. It was as much a matter of indifference to her as to Cedric that she brought nothing with her. Oxford smiled at her want of pride.

"If I had the money, I should n't care whether Cedric had any or not," she said, "so that is all right. I'm afraid Bruin was troubled about affairs at the last. Those mining shares were real bad eggs, Mr. Oxford. But don't let us talk about money."

"Lord Carshalton would have a fit if I were

married in black," she went on presently. "Then there's Evelyn to think of; so I shall wear the white and silver wedding-gown that Jefferson made for me. I shall go away in white too. Bruin would not mind. He was never small-minded."

"His daughter is like him," said Oxonford warmly.

"Don't praise me," she said. "I was in a hole of despair last week, but little Alfred hauled me out. He's a real trump, Alfred Seaton is!"

Then there was talk of the special licence and of the double marriage at Carshalton Court.

"Not in the drawing-room," Vera petitioned. "Let it be in the hall: there's space above, there."

And so the dream went on, until she found herself at Carshalton again: the same yet different, with every one terribly kind to her, and Seaton's last quotation ringing in her ears, "The greater the wrench, the finer the memory." But she had not said good-bye to the Cedar House. Cedric and she were to spend the honeymoon there, while Evelyn and Ralph went to the Riviera.

"At least I suppose we shall go there," said Evelyn, two days before the wedding. "But do you think Ralph and Cedric will be able to separate for the honeymoon? At the last moment I do believe they'll go off to one place together,

and you and I, Vera, will have to go to the other. But I shall stick to the Riviera. Positively I must show off my lovely frocks before I settle down to dulness here."

She made a grimace as she spoke, laying her hand lightly on Vera's arm. There were tears in the little minx's eyes; and Vera felt that life still held many duties for her, and that one of them was to play the part of elder sister to this lonely little bride.

"We shall pull well together, Eve," she said. "And if ever you are tempted to do anything extra foolish, just you tell me first. I'm not a model of wisdom, and I'm a champion at doing the improper thing, but I know what other people ought not to do, anyway. I'm clever enough for that."

And then both girls laughed. Evelyn was grateful to Vera for being so approachable in this time of sorrow and excitement and doubtful joy. They were all grateful to her; and Cedric's appreciation of her plucky behaviour amounted almost to affection. It was sweet to hear him say that her absence had made a blank: exhilaration to feel that she had not lost the trick of good-fellowship with him. The girl began to realise the sensations of a happy bride. "He wants me," she said to herself. "I'm not coming in such a bad second to Ralph, after all." But deep down in her heart she knew that the extent of her nega-

tive triumph was that he never would want any other woman.

Nana came to Vera's room the night before the wedding, and found her calm, but remote. Not a word of the sympathy of which her heart was full could Nana utter. More dumb she felt than the little black dog who lay on the bed and licked Vera's caressing hand. Alfred Seaton, by Vera's request, was to give her away. He and Aunt Eva were in the house now. *La Bercée's* affectionate letter lay on her dressing-table. All that remained of the past had gathered in this one little moment of the present to usher in the unknown future. Vera seemed to want no other help. Nana kissed her hand with a bursting heart, and went away thinking, "The young do not want the old; they do not want the old."

But Miss Droylsden sent for Nana the next morning to put the finishing touches to her bridal array. It was a very gentle Vera who stood to let Nana arrange her veil under Jefferson's critical eye. The old woman's fingers trembled exceedingly.

"Is Evelyn here yet?" asked Vera. "Will she come to me, and shall we go down together? I'm sure there will be a most unholy muddle, Nana. I don't seem to know my bearings as I should in a church. But the servants have arranged it all most rippingly. Who set the crucifix among the white flowers on the altar-table? Mavor,

the Catholic housemaid? I thought so. I won't have it moved away, Nana. Ah, here is Lady Carshalton. She looks like a bride herself."

And indeed Lady Carshalton was trembling, blushing, almost weeping: alight with emotion. Evelyn slipped into the room behind her, and Lady Carshalton kissed both brides and went away without speaking. As she came down the great staircase, with the gentle floating movement peculiar to her, Oxonford looked up; and for one perilous moment their eyes met. Then she went to Lord Carshalton and stood behind his chair. His trembling excitement calmed hers, and she laid a quiet hand upon his shoulder. He sat very still under the unusual caress.

Cedric and Ralph, exceedingly well-groomed as to their persons and correct in their manners, yet showed signs of the unregenerate Carshalton attitude towards domesticity. Cedric had a cold stare; Ralph an uneasy frown. Aunt Eva, watching them, felt a shade of criticism leaven her awe of Carshalton Court and all that therein was; and this gave her a refreshing sense of equality, allowing her to shed her facile tears in comfort. And Lady Carshalton spoke to her so graciously, and Mr. Oxonford crossed the room to stand at her side. Aunt Eva had hit upon a truth at last: these people were human, even as herself. Lords over life they might be,

but not masters of its incidents, and certainly not lords over death. She smoothed down the folds of her shining grey satin gown and wiped her eyes, at peace with all men.

The servants were assembling in the back-ground when Mrs. Manners entered fussily, with a stage whisper:

"Evelyn has just run up the other staircase, dear Lady Carshalton, to come down with Miss Droylsden. The darling child! She looks so charming! Have you spoken to my cousin, the dean? There he is, with the dear vicar. A noble-looking man in his vestments, is he not? The library serves as vestry, I see. All is most perfectly arranged. So that is Mr. Seaton? Mr. Oxonford, how do you do? What a touching occasion! So trying for us mothers!"

She used her tiny lace handkerchief, and inadvertently dropped it. Alfred Seaton, exquisite, calm, and gallant, handed it to her with a cour-tier's air. He looked far more like an expectant bridegroom than the twins, for he was high-wrought to the critical moment, his whole life concentrated, it seemed to him, on the last glimpse he was to get of his one woman in the character of Vera Droylsden.

Dean Holroyd and the vicar of Carshalton had taken their places before the white flowers and the crucifix. There was an expectant hush, a rustling and a whispering among the servants; then a

deeper hush. Evelyn and Vera were coming down the great staircase.

Hand in hand they came, Evelyn's little sisters—a quaint trio—bearing their trains. The white-and-silver filminess glistened clear against the dark Cain-and-Abel tapestry and caught the sunshine that is shed, even in winter, for happy brides. The portraits of departed Mandevilles looked down upon them, some inscrutably, some with a lifelike meaning borrowed from the changing light from above. At the turn of the staircase Evelyn's veil became entangled in the winged heel of a bronze Mercury; and Vera set it free again. For one moment the brides paused: the dark and fragile one looking up into the face of the strong and fair. Then Vera led Evelyn on again. It was she who was leading—Alfred Seaton saw that, as her steady eyes met his. She gave one long look at Cedric; and, in passing Lord Carshalton, bent to whisper, "Cheer up, dear old boy. For my sake, you know"; and Carshalton nodded and made pitiful efforts to obey. And then she put her hand in Seaton's, who held it until he had to give it to her husband. She was thinking of Bruin, he knew. For Alfred Seaton the flood-gates of passion were open. He was past thought; yet, with the ever-surprising diplomacy of youth, he stood there, well-poised, exquisite to the point of dandyism.

Evelyn had given her hand to her father, who

was the image of conscious inefficiency. The little man held it gently, with wistful eyes. But Evelyn's hand was unresponsive as a stone. Two conflicting visions possessed her brain: herself, clad in this coveted bridal array, and that pale crucifix among the flowers. What a strange juxtaposition! She stood possessed by it: to all outward seeming a dainty, correct little bride, who trembled no more than was natural in saying, "I will."

And Vera? The words of the service floated past her on a tide of feeling which left her high-stranded, mistress of the situation, free to act as usual. "I will," was said with nonchalance—"As if she were quite used to getting married," Jefferson said afterwards. And when Ralph, fumbling, dropped Evelyn's ring, it was Vera who swooped down and recaptured the small, unwilling symbol. Oxonford smiled at that: it was so like "the Droylsden girl." Cedric smiled also, looking at his bride with a renewed friendliness as he slipped the ring on her finger. She was warmed by that smile of his. It was the one thing relevant to her life in all this curious scene.

And as those strange words went floating past her, one phrase fixed itself at last in her brain as the point and climax of the whole: "O God, who by Thy mighty power hast created all things out of nothing—" When she had heard that she heard no more. "All things out of nothing—"

The words rang on when she turned, Cedric's wife, to kiss his friends and hers; when, a little later, she said her good-byes and went away to the untried life that was to begin on the stage of the past.

But she remembered at night, with a little cloud on her brow, that when she had passed the words on to Evelyn by way of comfort, the other bride had clung to her, crying desperately, "Oh, Vera, Vera!"

CHAPTER XXV

FATHER AND SONS

ALL her life Vera was to remember the short honeymoon at the Cedar House as a time of unhoped-for brightness. On the scene of all her youthful gladness, her too-recent sorrow, Cedric's heart was mercifully softened to his dauntless bride. It was as if some good angel had laid hands upon him awhile; or was it only that his bad angel was away? However that might be, the past, which Vera had buried as dead, seemed to have risen again, not as a ghost merely, but as a living spirit. This great good-fellowship between married boy and girl was perilously like love on both sides; yet the girl—the woman, holding the sweet comfort to her heart, said within herself, "This shall last me all my days."

Every moment of that time Vera lived to the full, as the condemned man drinks in the loveliness of the world in his last glimpse of it. And every moment was a consecration, a dedication of the past to the future. Bruin's spirit was not yet gathered to the far side of eternity. Where he had walked was strength.

Strong of heart Vera had need to be, for the end came soon. In experience she had passed through years, by the calendar only a fortnight, when a faint restlessness began to possess Cedric. It was like Elijah's little cloud at first, so small that the watcher could say, "It is nothing"; and when its presence could no longer be denied, Vera arose and girded herself to endure. To keep Cedric hers yet a little longer she must forego this blessed solitude. He caught eagerly at her suggestion of a theatre; apologised with a mention of Bruin; then thanked her rather too obviously for her answer, "Bruin would not mind: he would understand." An express train whirled them to London, and they went to see a witty society play, taking Upper Circle tickets.

"Best not do the duke," said Cedric, still harping on Bruin. "People won't spot us here."

He felt a pleasant thrill as he said the words, for a column on his marriage had appeared in the London papers: married, he was something of a personage. But to Vera, outwardly in high spirits, it was as if her last hour had come. Something was waiting for her in that gay theatre. She was not long in discovering what it was. As she looked down across a sea of faces, she was arrested by one spot of filmy whiteness in all that brilliance. It was the toilette of a little lady in the stage box, whose dark head, set delicately on the purity of her neck and shoulders, was bent

as she toyed with the fan in her lap. Her air of graceful weariness struck home to Vera, as a needle-thrust will, for a moment, penetrate an all-pervading pain. And in that moment, rushing together like steel and magnet, the eyes of the twins met.

Cedric rose in his seat, saying, "Ralph, by all that's impossible!" But the curtain was rising, and Vera's hand was on his arm. She kept it there through an interminable first act, of which she heard not a syllable; and Cedric was meek to the contact, knowing, in the light of the past fortnight and of his own emotion at sight of Ralph, what those minutes meant to her. But once the curtain was dropped, there was no retaining him. Together they made their way to the stage box. Afterwards Vera remembered no words of greeting, but only knew that she herself had looked into Evelyn's eyes and laughed. For, after all, it was droll; not all Evelyn's bitter little speeches could obscure the humour of the situation.

When the play was half over, Ralph raided his hotel for luggage, and four people travelled back to the Cedar House by the midnight train.

"Our honeymoon is over now," said Evelyn to her hostess. "We are brides no longer, but just commonplace wives. I could n't have kept Ralph at Cannes a moment longer. He would have come home to Cedric, if it had meant a

special steamer all the way. You don't want me, of course, but then I did n't want to come. So we are quits, are n't we?"

"Of course," answered Vera. "Cheer up, Eve. You and I will always pull together."

Two or three days afterwards Vera wandered through the half-dismantled rooms of the Cedar House, trying to reconstruct the past, now vanished for ever. The very scene of her life seemed removed from her consciousness, spirited away. Not this the place where she had loved and had looked forward to a life of love. The furniture of Bruin's study was on its way to Carshalton; shapes of bookcases, shelves, and pictures were outlined upon the fading walls; the carpetless floor was incredibly forlorn and soiled. Looking from the window, Vera could see Ralph and Cedric wandering arm in arm in the winter-stricken garden. Had ever that coldness without known the full bloom of summer? Had ever the hard dark water rippled lightly (bird-haunted) through depths of green, murmuring to the water-lilies as it stirred their leaves? Years ago, perhaps, when the summer days were long as the thoughts of youth; years ago, before all time had resolved itself into the transitory moment, before each tick of the clock spelt change and decay. Failing now to reconstruct the effaced, the vanished, Vera turned sturdily away to meet the future. Practical always, she sought the other lonely

bride; and found her contemplating a very extensive and beautiful wardrobe with undisguised satisfaction.

"I wish I cared about frocks," said Vera grimly.

"Cultivate the taste then," replied Evelyn. "It 's easily acquired."

"Not by me."

"Cultivate indifference, then," said Evelyn, with the sudden drop to weariness noticeable in her now. "I've read that somewhere. It is some one's philosophy of life—I don't know whose. But a jolly good idea, eh, Vera?"

"A beastly bad idea," answered Vera rudely. "I say, I'm off to Carshalton. I've had enough of this. Who's coming too? Are you?"

Evelyn burst out laughing; but her laughter soon dwindled to bitterness.

"Perhaps your husband may. Ask him!" she said.

"I'm going to," replied Vera stolidly.

The question sprang out of her like a bomb at the luncheon table; and the boys greeted it with a shout of laughter.

"What a queer card you are, Vera!" Cedric said. "But you're a trump all the same. What do you say, Ralph? Shall we go?"

"Right-O!" said Ralph. "I'm ready."

"We must give Eve time to pack her togs," Vera said; "and we must send a wire to Lady

Carshalton. I hope she won't mind. And then, you know, we can motor there quite easily in time for dinner; and we shall get out of all the bell-ringing and all that kind of tomfoolery, don't you know. We can give a fête or a luncheon or something to make up to the people, can't we, Cedric?"

"Anything you like," said Cedric, in high good humour. Evidently, in the opinion of the twins, Vera's idea was an inspiration.

"Unflattering, but funny too," Vera said to Evelyn; and the junior bride, in a chaos of frocks and frills, made answer:

"I know this—I shall be glad to have a maid about me again. You will have one too, Vera, won't you?"

"Not I! No maids nosing round me, thank you," said Lady Mottisfont. "Maids know too much. Besides, I could n't be worried with a woman everlastingly fussing me. Nana or Jefferson will always come and put me into my togs when I can't find the way in myself. I say, d' you know, I shall be glad to see Jefferson again, and Lord Carshalton, and the whole queer lot of them!"

The anticipation, absolutely genuine, was amazing to herself. It appeared that she was leaving the scene of all her hallowed joy and suffering in a sudden, unaccountable hardness of heart. When the car was at the door she strolled forth

from her old home with a face of unconcern. It was Jack who saved her from this outrage upon sacred memory. The little dog had crept back into the house, and was heard whining in one of the rooms. Vera found him in the empty study.

The aspect of the stripped room, which had something of the pathetic resistlessness of a dead face, struck Vera's heart. She picked up the small complaining creature and stood with him in her arms, softened once more to all pain and all joy. The others must wait now while she went through the half-denuded house, recalling the harmony of home, writing its every familiar and unfamiliar detail on her consciousness for ever. "Oh, may I never go on and forget!" In her dreams she would return to it: yes, like this—all forlorn, echoing only to the voices of servants; and in its summer beauty too, peopled only by her dear boys and Bruin. Mercifully that loveliness rose up before her once more: a vision to help her in the new life.

Still carrying her dog in her arms, Vera shut the door of the Cedar House and got into the car, with the soft, awakened look of one who sees the Beyond. Evelyn glanced at her with curiosity: Evelyn, who seemed so shallow and who saw so much; whose jeering little laugh was silent now for quite a long time. As for the twins, they were going along together at a ripping pace; Vera was a ripping driver; it was ripping

of her not to make a fuss: that was what they thought.

Months of strange experience followed. There was no bell-ringing, no gathering of tenants, no flower-strewn way for these November brides. Quite prosaically they dismounted from the motor-car, and in a short time felt as if they had never left the place. Lord Carshalton's tears of joy over Vera were soon dried; Lady Carshalton had an interval of prayerful peace. The brothers were inseparable as ever and carelessly amiable to their wives, who remained fast friends. It was not ideal, thought the Lady of Carshalton, but it was better than she had ever hoped for. Mrs. Manners came to the Court and gushed over Evelyn, who received her in rather a royal way. The transparent diplomatist understood that she was to hear no confidences. She went home and told Mr. Manners that a mother's sacrifices were never appreciated; and the little man, in a moment of daring, quoted the ancient maxim, "Virtue is its own reward."

What Evelyn thought of the new life was told only to Vera some time after the marriage.

"Other wives have duties, Vera," was one thing the child said. "When marriage chills love—it generally does, does n't it?—these duties fill the time and drive out thought. What are our duties? I do the flowers when Hawkins will let me—the servants don't like me as they like you—

and I saw you cleaning the motor-car this morning. Lady Mottisfont could find nothing better to do, I suppose?"

"Rot!" said Vera. "I liked doing it. I shall do it again. I'm all right. Don't waste your pity on me."

"I won't," said Evelyn dryly. "I want it for myself."

Vera looked at her keenly.

"Has it come to that already?" she asked. "Can't you shove it off a little longer? Try, Eve!"

"It's boring, being an honoured guest," said Evelyn. "That is what we are here."

"I don't feel it," declared Vera stoutly. "I'm quite at home."

Evelyn laughed.

"Ah, you have Lord Carshalton to take care of. How he loves you, Vera! He could not do without you now. He looks at you as a baby looks at its mother. But I have nothing of that kind to keep me going. I have no duties excepting," she added passionately, "one abominable duty of which I loathe to think. Nana harps for ever on one string: something is going to happen to Ralph and Cedric. As if Lord Carshalton were an accredited prophet! You and I are expected to have children, Vera. That is what we are here for."

"Well, I'm going to," said Vera coolly.

Evelyn gave a little gasp.

"Do you mean it?"

"Honour bright! Honest Injun!"

"Oh, then," said Evelyn, getting out an inefficient bit of lace and muslin and mopping her eyes, "perhaps I shall not so much mind."

"You poor little thing," said Vera gently, holding Evelyn's hand in her strong grasp. "Why did n't you tell me before, instead of going about looking wide-eyed and wistful, apart from your kind?"

"I could n't tell you," said Evelyn. "Somehow it seemed to me shameful. Heart to heart with her husband a woman might face the world. But we struggle on alone, Vera. Now I know how forsaken women feel. I will never be hard to them again."

"That's a good hearing," said the other girl. "Come, Eve, hold up your head and face it squarely. Other women have gone through this sort of thing before. We can't claim any distinction of unique suffering. Besides," she ended bluntly, "we've got to go through with it—can't help ourselves—so we may as well do it without whining. And, you know, every one will be as pleased as Punch. Is n't that something to think of?"

It was something to think of; yet the strong girl had her dark moments. Loving Cedric as she did, she was far less unhappy than Evelyn.

She was Jonathan to her wayward David. Yet the dark moments would come, especially in the heavy January days, when time seemed to stand suddenly still, the sun refusing any directness of light, the whole world in a stagnation—as of death—which negated any wise purpose in creation. “I am sunk so deep in the pit of winter,” thought Vera, “that I can never climb out again”; and in an awful remoteness from her fellows she felt how unavailing it was to stretch out hands for help to heaven or earth.

Alone she fought her weakness down. Out of chaos the world came, she argued. “Almighty God, who hast made all things out of nothing.” And as the days lengthened, lifting the corner of the pall of darkness, and snowdrops and aconites—unfailing little comforters—pierced their wonderful way through the frost-bound earth, and the whole eternal miracle of persistent life in apparent death began again to reveal itself, the cloud cleared away from her spirit.

Vera’s sense of humour dispersed the last vestige of it by disparaging the presentment of two weeping women, hand in hand.

“You are awfully hard-hearted,” said Evelyn fretfully one day. “Nothing seems to matter to you long. I believe you would swagger and talk slang if you knew the world would end to-morrow.”

“Oh, well,” said Vera, “I suppose I ’m built

that way. Don't be too hard on me. It is my stiff-necked nature."

"I'm a brute," said poor Evelyn then. "I don't know what makes me so waspish. But you know I could n't do without you, Vera."

Vera knew it well: the knowledge spurred her from a lapse into depression. And as the winter lightened into a truly glorious spring, her forward-reaching thought dwelt on the child that was to come; and all the force of her nature was given that it might emerge perfect from a mind and a body consecrated to the highest she knew. Something of this feeling she could communicate to sore-hearted Evelyn, so that she too had her intervals of cheerful anticipation. Evelyn used to look up from the beautiful, dainty sewing which was so easy an accomplishment with her and laugh at Vera's patient efforts with rebellious gusset and frill.

"Surely this will be accounted unto you for righteousness, Vera," she said one day.

"I wish I could do it as easily as I can clean and drive a motor, or scull a boat," was Vera's answer. "I was meant to be a man, but as I am a woman——"

"It will be accounted unto you for love," said Evelyn.

"You're not half a bad little sort, Eve," answered the other girl. "What a mercy it is we hit it off so well!"

And as Vera watched over Evelyn, so Lord Carshalton took care of Vera. It was strange and pathetic to see his attempts to serve her. He was triumphantly happy if he could totter across the room and bring her a footstool. Taking her arm to do it, he would stagger out into the gardens to worry the head-gardener for choice offerings of fruit and flowers. In the hot days of a rainless July it was Carshalton's pleasure to see Vera established in a favourite shady nook. Half a dozen servants were bullied before the chairs and cushions and cooling drinks and books satisfied him. The arrangements for her comfort included Evelyn's, but it was of Vera that he thought incessantly; and the strong girl was content to play the weak woman to please him. For Carshalton was coming to his redemption at last, thinking of some one other than himself.

"He will totter into heaven, after all," said Evelyn, with her fine little smile. "I wonder, Vera, if Ralph and Cedric will save their souls some day by playing patient husband to other women. Things work out in odd circles, don't they? We must be prepared to face it. I only hope we'll be able to take it as well as Lady Carshalton does."

In the meantime, by the philosophy of their wives and by their own callousness, the boy husbands were left free to the animal enjoyment of life. Coolly and amiably they did as they

pleased; so that Nana was moved at last to satire:

"It is n't so bad, being married, after all, is it? Quite easy and pleasant you find it, don't you?"

"It's right enough," answered Cedric indifferently.

But even this little flick of the whip was too much. Perhaps the boys had been meditating flight beforehand; perhaps there was a sudden reaction in their wild blood from months of negatively good behaviour; perhaps it was the inherited dread of fatherhood and domesticity. Whatever the motive, one summer evening, when all Carshalton was agog for the coming of the heir, the twins were reported missing. It was Oxonford who told the girls, with grave, half-careless kindness, looking away from them as he spoke.

Their silence struck indignation from the strong man.

"Do you want them here?" he said to Vera. "If you do, I'll set all Scotland Yard upon their track and drag them back by the scruff of their necks, the shameless young dogs! Yes, and I'll horse-whip 'em both well before I chain 'em up, Lady Mottisfont."

Vera laughed.

"Don't do it for me," she said. "I'm all right. What about you, Evelyn? Do you mind very much?"

"Mind!" cried Evelyn fiercely. "Mind, indeed! I'm glad, I tell you! I'm glad Ralph is away!"

And she threw herself into Vera's arms and sobbed like a broken-hearted child.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CALL OF THE SEA

EMPTY the fashionable call London in September; and empty it may be of those who kill time daintily for their own pleasure; but overcrowded, Heaven knows, with toiling humanity. A full tide of life streamed under the windows of the great hotel where the truant husbands were staying; so that Ralph wondered what the deuce all those poor devils down below were up to. Poor devils he called them as he stretched in his luxurious bed; yet what he wanted most at the moment was to get his breakfast and be up and doing too. But he disciplined himself to lie still in bed, reading a stale novel, the pages of which he turned very softly, because in the other bed close by the well-beloved was snatching a late, uneasy sleep.

A fortnight's dissipation had left Ralph even of colour, bright of eye, alert of body. The moment he flung himself down he slept the sleep which is commonly supposed to be the portion of the just in this world; and he awoke in his unrumpled sheets fit and ready for all pleasant sinning. He was a fine young animal. But

Cedric paid dearly for his pleasure. He had fretted and tossed through the slow hours of coming dawn in the sleepless weariness that touches on agony; and finally, in the hard daylight, he had flung himself to the side of his disordered bed, arms outstretched, as if in violent entreaty, his haggard face fallen upon them: lost to full consciousness at last for a merciful hour or two. Under the kind wing of sleep he looked a child again; but a too acute child, who knows that he is born to sorrow. His attitude, his look, cut Ralph to the heart.

"Merciful powers!" he said. "If he should die before me!"

And he scowled into space, fighting the horrid thought. Then he shook it off and went on with his reading. And presently Cedric's waxen eyelids lifted, and from under the contraction of the eyebrows the dark eyes looked upon life again. Vaguely at first; then distastefully, as Life's image to his awakening sense grew clothed upon with the real. So still he lay, glowering at the returning world, that Ralph forbore to speak. And presently Cedric flung his head back upon his pillows and said:

"What a beastly room this is! Altogether too correct and handsome. How it jumps at you!"

"It's all right as hotels go," said Ralph, throwing his novel on the floor and stretching himself with relief. "But of course it is n't Carshalton.

Would you like to go back there, old fellow? I suppose we 're about due, are n't we?"

"You mean," said Cedric peevishly, "that duty calls?"

Ralph made no answer. Deep down in his being some chord thrilled strangely: some wild, shy feeling, half attractive, half exasperating, wholly to be concealed. This was all his unawakened nature could feel of the responsibility of fatherhood. Shame of his conduct he had none. If Cedric had said the word to return to Carshalton, Ralph would have gone quite gaily. He was the sinner ideal: so robust in body as to have no use for conscience.

But Cedric had thrust out his hand to pluck at some light thing hanging out of the pocket of his dinner-jacket, which lay on a chair near the bed. It was a long French kid glove. He threw it down on the bed and sat up, looking at it with disgust. The thing lying there was still moulded to the curves of the hand and arm whence it had been drawn. It showed a too generous proportion of arm and wrist and the outline of a hand, small enough but fleshy, with plump, tapering fingers: the hand that demands luxury at whatever price. White the glove had been, but it was white no longer. It was a tarnished thing: seen in the daylight, very typical.

Cedric picked it up with the tips of his fingers and flung it on the floor. Disgust of vice had

seized him: the nearest he could come to repentance. And at the psychological moment there came into the line of his vision the image of Vera—clean and strong, yet so near the time of her woman's dire distress: Vera, who had not sold herself to him, as Evelyn to Ralph, but who had loved him in spite of all. Was it only disgust of vice, or did it verge on repentance? Unanswered question; but it is certain that he could not bring himself to face fatherhood yet.

"Carshalton?" he said. "No, not Carshalton. But let's get away from here. Let's get away to the sea, Ralph, old man. I believe it's the only free, clean thing in all this devil's world."

Ralph was willing enough.

"Let's go to Cornwall by the night express," he said. "I should think it must be fun travelling by night. Makes you feel you have really kicked yourself free, eh, old man? Can you sleep in the train, though?"

"As well as anywhere else," said Cedric fretfully. "Now the question is, where to go?"

Who can tell what blind chance led to the answering of that question? With map and Bradshaw before him, and the whole of an unknown county to choose from, Cedric's fancy fell on a tiny fishing-village in a cove near the Lizard.

"I have a feeling for that place," he said. "There's no railway there: it must be remote

from all beastliness. And I've heard something rather jolly about it, I'm sure, though the Lord knows what. Let's go there."

"Right-O!" said Ralph. "But what is the nearest station?"

A travelled waiter was ready with information.

"A sleeping-car from Paddington by the ten o'clock train to-night, and an easy run of it till seven to-morrow morning. Nothing to do then but change trains, and at seven-thirty there you are, sir. Conveyance on to the cove, sir. As easy as walking across the road for gentlemen with means. There's a tidy little hotel there now, from all that I can hear, sir."

The boys were wild to be off; and never had a day seemed so long. Cedric was too weary for amusement. All the afternoon he lay on his bed in sleepless, fretful gloom, while Ralph wandered in and out and cursed the weather. The sunshine of the morning was gone and the wind had got up, driving leaden clouds before it and letting down now and then slapping showers of rain.

"My aunt! How it hits the pavement!" exclaimed Ralph, standing with his hands in his pockets, looking down on a scurrying crowd of umbrellas. "There's no mercy in it. The rain on the grass at Carshalton is quite another story."

"Do you want to go back there?" asked Cedric sharply.

"Not I!" answered Ralph.

He hesitated.

"I've an idea that Oxonford is after us."

Cedric raised himself on his elbow.

"Jove! So have I! There must be something in it. Ralph, I can't go straight back."

There was a pause. Through the slap of the rain and the hurried heart-beat of London these misguided boys heard the weird wailing with which all life begins; and one of them at least saw in a flash of heaven's lightning the picture of himself as he should be: kneeling for forgiveness at the feet of the woman whose suffering he had not tried to share. She would want to lift him to her heart: he knew it, and shuddered. Heaven's lightning flash swept by, leaving black darkness.

"I can't face it yet," he said again.

"Let's clear at once," was Ralph's abrupt suggestion. "Oxonford may draw all the best hotels. We will tell the waiter—confound him! he's much too confidential—that we have changed our minds and are off to Yorkshire. Then we'll cab it to Paddington and have dinner there; and so off to-night quite comfortably to Cornwall."

No sooner said than done. After a hasty packing, Ralph called up the fattest waiter to sit upon the luggage; and then, tipping profusely, after the Carshalton manner, the brothers got into a taxi-cab, calling out, "King's Cross, cabby, and hurry up!"

"They say they're off to Yorkshire," said the

travelled waiter, chinking his gold, "and perhaps they may take it by the way. But all roads lead to hell for some folks."

The cabman was of much the same opinion when he received abrupt orders to turn in the direction of Paddington; but he was well paid, so what did it matter?

By this time the sun was going down in a lurid copper haze, purple-edged to a leaden sky. Under it the wet pavements had a hard, metallic sheen, and the dingy houses stood piteously revealed in all their naked squalor. The wind had spent its tears for the moment and was lashing itself into a greater fury. Silent, wind-buffed, the nameless citizens of this unlovely quarter fought their way onward, with muddied boots and draggled skirts and changeless faces. Close by Paddington station a gutter child, fallen in the mud, sat and howled dismally; arraigning all his gods for cruelty, while the hurrying world disregarded him. Again Cedric was smitten with the sudden sharp thought of Vera, who could never have passed by on the other side. He answered his own thought aloud.

"That kid is only one of millions," he said, thrusting his hands deep in his pockets and drawing his brows together. "He is the voice of the whole rotten world. What animals we are! Our hoofs are in the mud, and the quagmire's deep enough to suck in our whole bodies. And the

curse of it is that we know it. The four-footed ones don't. How cruel that copper light is! You can fancy the whole of hell fizzling behind it. The wind is the shriek of it let loose!"

"We will go and have a jolly good dinner," said prosaic Ralph; and Cedric's bitter smile softened as he looked at his twin.

They dined like young aldermen, and enjoyed it in their own peculiar way. Everything was of the best, and nothing was good enough for them. Their waiter coughed apologetically behind his hand, meek to much bullying, foreseeing a good tip. He knew his world, and kept what emotion was in him for home use, like the wise man he was. Ralph voted him not a bad sort of idiot. Cedric's haughty verdict was that the man was paid to cringe; yet even as he said the words Vera's bright glance assailed him in the name and for the dignity of common humanity. He passed his hand wearily over his forehead and thought of the cleansing sea, sure tonic for weakened nerves.

Towards the end of the meal Ralph said suddenly:

"What fools we are to think ourselves safe from Oxonford here! He is as likely to track us to this hotel as to any other. Shall we clear out into the station?"

"We are fools to think he is after us at all," said Cedric, warmed by good wine.

“And yet there it is. We do think it,” declared Ralph. “Why, the idea is hot in me. There must be something in it.”

It was strange, indeed, how the idea held them. Strange, too, how the freedom of the sea called them: how the desire for it strained and tugged and drove them. But no stranger than many a hot little desire upon which we look back with wonder when a merciful providence has allowed us time to cool.

Ten o'clock came at last, and no Oxonford. While the rest of the world said gay and sad farewell, Cedric sank down exhausted on the seat of his sleeping-compartment, while Ralph bullied a porter into getting extra pillows for his beloved twin. Finally, from the hurrying brightness of the station the train steamed out into the wild night. With a hand as gentle as a mother's, Ralph tucked his brother up; then, flinging himself carelessly down, was lost in dreamless sleep.

And to Cedric, sleepless though he was, the tumult of the night brought peace. All the riot—the tearing, the shrieking, the sobbing of the wind, the rattle of the rain—was without; while within was a gentle light and warmth: the steady throb of the engine, like the unfailing heart of love, carrying him on to the appointed end; and near him, alone with him, in this intimate calm in the heart of the storm, his twin soul, his one

desire in life and death, his brother. He thought of the time when they had been separated; and, listening to Ralph's regular breathing, smiled a smile of thankfulness. For the first time in his life he was consciously grateful. Cynic though he was, he could not explain away the peace that had fallen upon him in all this tumult of nature. Had the wind ceased but for one moment, he could not have borne it. It was the continuity, the stress, the intensity of the night's emotion, that calmed him; as the furious little ego in us may forget itself awhile in the great presence of Pain and Death. Or perhaps, though he knew it not, his peace was the calm of utter exhaustion: the smooth tension of the nerves when they are strained to the breaking-point. However that might be, the long night was none too long for him; and when the wind sank and the world arose again out of the slow dawn, he sat up and sighed, as over some precious experience past.

A grey world it was at first, rising into vision like the ghost of some spent emotion; but gaining form and life and colour under a pink and purple dawn. A new world to Cedric: one of remote peace; with little villages in damp holes and cottages clinging to the hillsides, whose green shone vivid against the red-brown under-soil breaking through. Sometimes his eye fell on ranging rocks covered with dry heather, where wild nature called for no toil of man: sometimes

on smooth paths of turf beside little streams, which made him think of the words, "Thou leadest me beside the still waters." From very far away those words sounded: from the thither side of the gulf dividing yesterday from to-day. Wide yawned that gulf. Into what unexplored realm, into what new æon of time, had the wild night-wind swept him? Far up the hillside the figure of a peasant, sharply outlined against the brightening sky, as he trod a footpath on the top of a wide stone wall, brought the ring of other words from the far side of Time—or Eternity was it?—"And I, when I shall be lifted up on high, shall draw all men unto Me."

Hastily Cedric sat up and tried to pull himself together; yet was still in a dream-country when he awoke his brother.

"Are we there already?" asked Ralph, rubbing his eyes. "Aunts! but I feel dirty. Have you slept? Not a wink, I bet. What a grovelling brute I am! I can always eat and drink and sleep. Have we got to change here? I'll do the trick. Just don't you fag, old boy."

They reached Helston in a blaze of early daylight, had a cup of coffee there, and hired a rickety waggonette to take them seaward. As they ambled shakily through the long-drawn valley, the last wreaths of morning mist were rising to the hill-tops under the growing brilliance of the day. Seaward, seaward they went through this,

their land of hope, with its streams and its wind-mills and its scanty patches of corn, until the signs of the thing they longed for struck their senses with delight: the freshening breeze, the landward-running sand-hills, the flocks of screaming sea-birds. And still, in a strange exhilaration of nerves, which seemed a miracle of healing, Cedric felt no weariness.

They breakfasted at the quaint little hotel: Ralph with unspoilt appetite, Cedric eating sparingly in a refinement of absorption. He was, as Ralph said, quite beastly polite to every one; and, when teased about it, only answered, "Let us get down to the sea."

From the top of the cliffs they could see the white sand of the cove stretching out seaward in a half-circle, rock-strewn as by a giant's hand. Rocks like pyramids; like steeples; overhanging rocks, pierced with dark caverns for the sea to rush in and fill with the greater mystery of sound; rocks lying on the sand, pool-studded for a haunt of little sea-beasts, left by the ebbing tide: all of a vivid colour in the sunlight—silver-grey, golden-yellow, malachite green, deep-toned red and brown, flashing, foam-wet, like Aphrodite's own jewels. The sea, lashed all night by the wind, was tossing still, with white, restless edges, but with tints of blue and emerald as the water deepened over the shelving sand. Southward the sails of distant ships glittered like little fires as

they crossed the flashing track of the sun; and landward cliff after cliff, with here and there a cornfield waving to the very edge, dawned gently through the golden haze. White foam, tossing over a black ridge of rock; white clouds, piled high, resisting the morning airs; white gulls, dipping and swooping against the blue of the sky, or sunning their plumage on high, riven ledges:—a world of free space and transparent colour and flashing movement.

And as Cedric gazed upon the great, bright sea, something infinite—or ultimate, was it?—in the purple line of the horizon sweeping to the distant blue struck upon his sharpened senses, with prescience of the future, vague yet overbearing. Some undreamed-of condition, some purpose of destiny, seemed to be fulfilled within him. The tension of his nerves drew to snapping-point. The sunlight went black around him, and he would have fallen but for Ralph's supporting arm. From the other side of Nowhere came the beloved voice:

“Steady, dear old man, steady! It's rest you want, you know.”

CHAPTER XXVII

TOGETHER

THE little moon was climbing up the dark stair of heaven and peeping in at Cedric's bedroom window; and with it came the lap, lap of the waves on the shore below, with now and then a human voice or footstep and the whiff of seamen's tobacco. From a deep sleep Cedric had awakened to this dim world of peace. All sound seemed far away from him; farther still the ugly London life he had left behind.

After lying very still awhile, he sat up and looked round the little room. Simple as a prophet's chamber it was: low-ceiled, small-windowed, spotless by day, with its whitewash and dimity hangings, and now thrown out in mysterious black-and-white by the art of the moonlight. As homely a room as he had ever rested in; not inhumanly handsome as the great London hotel; with none of the ancestral stateliness of Carshalton; but holding intimate secrets of Life and Death and humanity: a place to rest in—if need be, to die in. The thought of something ultimate

possessed him. He seemed to have come to the last ramparts of the world; and beheld them, not steep and flaming and terrible, but having for their Beyond and For Ever the infinite moonlight waters of cleansing and half-conscious rest. For two whole days Cedric had lain helpless, hearing in his dreams the wash of the waves. Now the call of the sea grew insistent again and in his recovered strength he presently answered it. So when Ralph crept into the room he saw his brother dressed and standing by the window.

"Oh, there you are, old man," Cedric said. "I'm clothed and in my right mind, and longing to get down to the sea again. Are you game?"

"Rather! But we'll get off quietly. They think I've come to bed, and we don't want search-parties after us, do we? We can wake 'em up fast enough when we want to get in."

The twins got clear away, with their usual skill; Cedric slipping off while Ralph asked the barmaid for whisky and milk to take upstairs to his brother, and Ralph joining him by way of a convenient staircase window. But a boy, truant like themselves, took an interest in them and tracked them down to the shore, hiding in a natural archway of rock to spy upon them. There might have been spies all around for aught they knew. The rock-strewn cove was full of hiding-places, and when the little moon sailed clear of clouds she could not show up half their

secrets. A land of strange shapes and shadows, with pools of mystery, left by the fast-ebbing tide. Silently the boys picked their way among the giant rocks until they stood upon the margin of the sounding sea, the wet sand drawing away under their feet in the backward clutch of the waves. Closer, closer, and yet the rippling silver sea and its every light air went on calling them. Calm enough it looked: deep, quiet, clean, as the heart of Love itself, murmuring unfathomable things.

"There's a boat under the cliffs," said Ralph. "I had a look at her this morning. Easy enough to launch her. And she's got a bit of a sail, too, that we could hoist, so that we could get right out to sea."

Through rock and pool a sandy way was found for the launching of the boat. And now the hiding urchin, overcome by curiosity, peered too boldly and was seen. Ralph got him by the collar and shook him into the service.

"Lend a hand, you young rascal," he said; and the young rascal lent an extremely able one.

"What are we to do with him?" Ralph asked. "Shall we take him with us and drop him into the sea? Drowned boys tell no tales. Or shall I lash him to a rock until we come back?"

"Bribe him," said Cedric shortly.

So the urchin was bribed with half-a-crown and

the promise of untold silver in the future, if he could hold his rascally little tongue.

"But if you blab a word before to-morrow morning, not another penny will you get, but a jolly good hiding instead," Ralph said. "You can say what you like to-morrow, so long as you let us have a run for our money. We shall pay for the boat all right."

The boy was willing enough. The whole thing was to him a great and mighty adventure. He begged in vain to be allowed to go too; then, resigning himself, leaked useful information concerning ways of getting out of the cove and shallows and currents. There was a current running seaward a mile and a half an hour, according to this little guide.

"Her 'll take you out to sea voine, if so be you can strike her. The wind 's fair and all. Set your sail, and ye 'll blow seaward like a nutshell. Be I coming too? I 'd show ye."

No, he was not to come. Cedric would not hear of it. So, ruefully, this less fortunate truant helped to shove off the boat, watched her dwindle to a vanishing-point, then went home, expectant of the morrow, biting his half-crown to harden himself in sin.

Chance rather than skill guided the brothers past rock and shallow and treacherous eddy into the wide waste of waters. Ralph had the oars; Cedric the tiller. Clear of the coast at last, they

hoisted their little sail, and a steady breeze carried them westward. The quick white flash of the Lizard light, the line of the land, appearing dim and threatening when the capricious moon unveiled herself, filled them with adventurous sense of escape. Above them the diamond eyes of the firmament glittered through silvery, drifting clouds: realm beyond realm of light, in heights and depths of space half revealed. The wide murmur of the ocean beckoned them on, with no human voice, towards an immeasurable freedom. Only the dipping white lights of fishing-smacks showed that others shared their destiny; and when one of these little craft passed quite near, homeward bound, and hailed them with a rough and friendly curiosity, the boys sat glum and unresponsive, resentful of human interference; Ralph seizing the oars again, the better to speed along. But soon he dropped them and turned to stare at the seaward horizon that seemed for the moment all the future of their desire. Fast, fast they drifted, heedless of their goal, so that it be other than the captive domesticity from which they fled. They had been for some time on the breast of the seaward current of which the urchin had spoken, and it needed but little seamanship to make way with sail and tide.

They were rather silent under the influence of the night; but Ralph, thoughtful always of his brother's comfort, offered brandy from his flask

now and again, and asked if Cedric were cold or tired. But Cedric had no landward leanings. That strange exhilaration which had possessed him in the train was again upon him; and the night was mild as a May morning. Even now the breeze was dying away; so that their sail, flapping useless, had to be lowered. They were out to sea by this time—it was long past midnight—and in the distance the white and red flash-light of the Wolf Rock was visible. Presently out of the stillness came the blast of a fog-horn. Then silence again; then another blast.

"There's a fog somewhere," said Ralph. "Can that be the Wolf signal? Should we hear it all this way off?"

They listened again and again for the weird sound, until it became the voice of the night—a voice which they would not miss. Another sound reached them; from the south, as far as they could make out: a horn and the ringing of a bell.

"The dead men are ringing their bells at the bottom of the sea," said Cedric.

"It's a fishing-smack befogged," said Ralph. "That's their signal. A fisherman told me so this morning."

Even as he spoke the moon ran behind a cloud, turning its smoke to silver, and a little chill struck their faces, like the touch of a fleshless hand. The moon, quickly reappearing, showed

herself caught in a mist light as a veil, through which the stars too looked large and shimmering. A minute more, and moon and stars were blotted out. The boat had drifted into a dense bank of fog. The boys could just see each other's faces; but the world for them was gone. There was no distance: nothing but the chill walls of fog, ghostly prison walls, through which they drifted, escaping never.

"We must just sit tight and trust to luck," said Ralph, with a laugh.

"Yes," answered Cedric indifferently. "Jove! how sightlessness adds a weight to sound! This is the way to get to know the value of things."

And indeed, piercing this complete and sudden isolation, the fog-horns and the bells had a strange quality of tone, as though coming from without the bounds of human experience. Soon the twins were listening intently, fancying new sounds from the unseen waters around them or from that region of the living and the drowned beneath them. Dull, heavy sounds, that made the sunlight of yesterday a thing celestial of dreams and visions. Strange shapes seemed to loom upon their straining eyes; so that at last Cedric leaned over to trail his hand in the reality of the cold water, and tried to speak loudly to break the spell.

"Dante never put this in his *Inferno*," he said.

As he spoke there came a sound which was a brutality of realism in a vanishing mist of fears.

Another fog-horn, very insistent, drawing nearer, nearer—blowing louder, louder, with relentless swiftness of approach. And soon there came an under note to it: the quick, mechanical swish, swish of a propeller revolving in the water.

"We must be in the track of the liners," said Ralph, seizing the oars. "Jove! Which way is she coming?"

In those minutes of helplessness, when the warning seemed to come from before them, from behind them, from above, from every point of the compass, so that there was no salvation anywhere, each looked through the dimness into the other's face and read there an inexorable courage.

"Strip off your coat, old man," cried Ralph, flinging his own down in the boat.

Then, suddenly, and as with a rushing sense of relief, the unseen destruction took shape, and they saw looming up in the mist the white and red and green lights of a liner. She was upon them: a great, black, merciless thing, coming straight for them, like an eagle swooping upon a wren. Ralph had just time to fling his arms round his brother, so that they went down together into the yawning black pit of the sea.

The officer on the bridge, hearing a crash and a cry, immediately reversed the engines, and in a few minutes the great liner was brought to, floating triumphant over the waters of night and death. Human hands were eager to save human

life, but before a boat could be lowered the boys were far astern and lost in the fog. So at last the search was abandoned, and the liner made her way up-channel. "Poor devils!" said the officer on watch—"Poor devils! I wonder who they were"; and so went back to the business of life again.

In cold and darkness the brothers were making a game struggle. Out of the deep they had risen, sputtering and choking; Ralph swearing quite cheerfully. Cedric, who could not swim, had the nerve to do as he was told, and, with Ralph's help, threw himself on the water and floated. Not a light pierced the mist, and the fog-horns and bells sounded a message of doom. At longer intervals came a report like a big gun firing; thumping the dull air and travelling heavily over the surface of the water.

"Another confounded fog-signal," said Ralph. "I wonder if we are anywhere near Longships lighthouse?"

Then, oh, miracle! something drifted through the walls of their prison and struck against them. It was the capsized boat. In that moment of relief Ralph saw salvation accomplished. In the hour that followed he was to know the long-drawn Hope, whose other name is Dread and whose climax is Despair. He had his arm linked under his brother's to help support him.

"Cedric, old man, are you all right?" he said

again and again. Or, "Are you awfully cold? Hang it! I wish I had n't hurled that brandy away with my coat." Or, "If only this infernal fog would lift!" And at intervals he shouted into the void, until his throat ached and he was silent for the sheer futility of it.

Impossible to guess how long it was before the wind freshened from the west and swept the fog before it. To emerge from that chill prison of darkness into the starlit, moonlit brilliance was like a resurrection.

"At least we shan't die like an old dog in a box," Ralph exclaimed; and Cedric said that the stars were ripping. One star, in particular, hanging low in the west, seemed so to thrill and tremble with its own exceeding light that he found himself watching it lest, like the^l lost angels, drunk with the joy of heaven, it should shoot from its orbit to an irretrievable fall. Ralph, meanwhile, made practical use of the return of light; and succeeded in scaling the capsized boat and sitting astride of it. With all his efforts he failed to pull Cedric up; and as he could not so well support his brother in that position, he presently slipped down into the water again. Fog-signals and bells had fallen silent now; not a human sound was in all the great sea. The white lights of the fishing-smacks dipped so far distant that Ralph saw the hopelessness of shouting, and saved his strength to help his brother. He

had ceased to ask Cedric if he felt cold: he was growing so numb himself that he feared the answer; and the look on the beloved face struck at his heart, so passive was it, so acquiescent to the coming end. He roused himself to draw Cedric back across the border line.

"That little blighter that helped to shove us off—" he said.

"What of him?"

"He 'll lose his ten shillings, poor little beggar!"

"Not if Vera gets hold of him," murmured Cedric; and at the name of Vera the boys took their last backward look at life. Twin souls ever, they conjured up now the same image of it: brilliant summer on the river; tall grasses waving; a strong girl, guiding a punt; and hot love and jealousy running in their own veins. All the sharp sting of it came back as a divine, remembered pleasure now that their glorious freehold of the body was so nearly expired.

"Old chap," said Ralph softly, "I wonder if they are boys or girls. I 'd rather like to know."

Cedric made no answer, but presently he murmured:

"That coin fell wrong, you know. I 'm certain of it."

His weak voice struck Ralph with a physical anguish which was like the returning rush of strength. He shifted his position a little, the better to help his brother; and, seeing a dipping

elusive light over the water which might be rather nearer than the rest, spent himself in shouting.

"It's no good," said Cedric dreamily; and silence fell again.

What agony of death was for Ralph's share he felt then. The young strength in him was dying hard—a double death, as the face of his twin showed drawn and sharpened in the moonlight. With heart and brain and muscle he fought against this wrong of nature, this awful tearing of soul from body, this inexorable forced exit into the Unknown.

But Cedric, high-strung of spirit, weak of body, was passing from world to world in an elusive dream of peace. He had lost, at last, the sense of chill in his limbs; and, no longer able to feel the cold swish of the water, had the illusion of floating above it. The firmament seemed to lower to him like a star-spangled pall; himself, like a re'eased spirit, hovering between the dim, bright waste of heaven and sea. This seeming warmth of extreme numbness was fast becoming a pleasant way of death; so that to sink into the lap of eternity would be a luxury. A star falling—far, it seemed, before it went out like a spark from a fire—brought back the sense of space and distance, the consciousness of all that was happening to him, the touch of the hand under his arm.

"Let me go, old chap," he gasped. "I'm done for."

"I 'm damned if I will," said Ralph.

"We 'll be damned anyway," whispered Cedric, incurable of levity to the last.

"Yes, but together," answered Ralph—"together!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW HEIR

VERA was lying in a great peace, waiting for Cedric; and by her side was the tiny, red-faced creature that had changed the aspect of the world. A queer, groping, bald, toothless, wrinkled thing it was, with ineffectual movements; so extremely young as to look most weirdly old. Clear-sighted Vera saw all this, just as she would have seen it in any other new-born baby, and yet she was in a triumph of maternity. That strength of hers, so fast returning, rejoiced over the weakness of the small being who was hers to love and help. "The hands that cling and the feet that follow":—the beautiful poet-words came again and again to make a mind-picture for her. Vera was a very happy woman.

But often she said to Nana, "I wish Cedric would come. Cedric can't help liking his little girl."

For Vera's was a girl-baby.

"You must forgive me this once, old pal!" she had whispered faintly to Carshalton, who was the first to see her, because his terrible anxiety

could not be denied. "Forgive me this once. Do better next time, I hope."

Carshalton was speechless, but he kissed her hand—so absurdly pale now—and he kissed the impertinent baby (warily, for he had never done such a thing before), and Vera shut her eyes and sank into a most heavenly sleep. Poor Carshalton felt as if he could not leave her. It was pitiful to see his concern for her in the absence of the husband who was following in his own errant footsteps. When they led him out of the room he found her dog; and sat in the corridor with the little beast in his arms, until Evelyn came and spoke to him with great kindness; and then he tottered away. Evelyn was the one hope of his line now, had he but known it; yet he could not bear the sight of her. To his poor distraught mind she was Vera's rival.

But there was no thought of rivalry between the girls.

"I know what Cedric will say to me," said Vera one day to Evelyn. "'Just like your cheek, Vera, to have the wrong sort of baby!' That's what he'll say. And if yours is a boy, Eve, he'll say it's cheek too. But he will like his little girl. Oh, I wish I could get up! The old dog is not dead yet, you see. How good it will be to have a cigarette between my teeth again!"

Lady Carshalton, holding Vera's child, was filled with a soft amazement. The baby's in-

spired impertinence in daring to be a girl seemed an answer to those ancient prayers of hers. She carried it down-stairs to show it to Oxonford, who looked at her more than at the baby—so young and pleased she was; and got no glances in return. "Madonna and child make a picture alone," he reflected. "Man is shut out of that Eden." And he was content to worship his dear lady thus: exquisite and remote in her happiness as in her sorrow.

"She is quite pretty already," Lady Carshalton said.

"Is she?" he asked doubtfully. "Yes, I suppose she is."

"Of course she is, Oxonford. Look!"

He was looking at the child and smiling at the lady when Hawkins brought a telegram. It was addressed to Lord Carshalton, but Oxonford opened it as a matter of course.

"Business, I suppose," said Lady Carshalton, hardly noticing his silence, so absorbed was she in her new delight.

"Yes, business," he answered; and added, "It may call me away for a day or two."

"Oh, don't be long, Oxonford," said she, lifting her pretty eyes for a moment only; and Oxonford, as he travelled westward, recalled the picture of the still fair woman bending over the poor little baby.

Before leaving Carshalton he had told Nana and

Hawkins what was feared. He would return very soon. In the meantime, all newspapers were to be confiscated, all visitors kept from Lady Carshalton. For there was still just the shadow of a doubt.

Not in Nana's mind. No shadow there but the black one of this double doom. The brave old woman went about as usual, crying out only to Hawkins, "My boys! My boys! And never an heir!"

But by the time Oxonford returned there was an heir. Evelyn's fatherless child was a boy.

"My boys! My boys!" cried Nana, who had Vera's girl in her arms. "'Tis you must tell my lady, Mr. Oxonford."

When Oxonford was with Lady Carshalton Nana saw Mrs. Manners's carriage coming up the avenue; and went slowly back to Vera's room. The newspapers had the story already; the servants were whispering it under their breath. Best get the telling over; for, to the old woman's excited fancy, the secret rang through the silent house.

Passing Lord Carshalton's open door, she saw him sitting at a table playing aimlessly with a coin which he had taken from his pocket. He glanced up at her with the cunning look of a detected child. Such a forlorn, broken spectacle he presented that she could not pass him by.

She went in and said, "My lord, do you know that Mrs. Mandeville has a boy?"

"I know it," he answered. Then, with a glimmer of his old dare-devil smile, he asked, "Can't you mix 'em up again?"

"Who will tell him?" Nana muttered to herself as she left him. "Not I. 'T is only Lady Mottisfont will know how."

Vera was reading letters—fantastic and faithful—from La Bercée and Alfred Seaton. She looked so strong and radiant and expectant that Nana could not bear to see her and stood away from the bed, bending over the child to hide her face.

"Well?" said Vera. "The doctors are gone, are n't they? What news of Evelyn?"

"'T is a boy," answered Nana sombrely.

Vera looked at her with curiosity. It seemed that Nana was sorry for her—too sorry.

"Foolish Nana!" she said, stretching out her arms for her child.

But Nana did not move.

"Is Evelyn all right?" asked Vera.

"Yes, she is right enough," answered Nana, quite roughly.

"Well, go and tell her not to be too jolly well pleased with herself," Vera said then; "because my next will be a boy."

She was arrested by Nana's awful look.

"Tell me what it is, Nana," she said. "Tell me quickly"; and Nana told her in a few words.

For a moment the two women looked fearfully into each other's eyes.

"Give me my girl, Nana. Give me my girl," said Vera of the Strong Heart.

And so Nana left her.

THE END

*A Selection from the
Catalogue of*

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS



**Complete Catalogues sent
on application**

*"No one who reads it can ever forget it."
Albany Times-Union.*

POPPY

The Story of a South African Girl

By Cynthia Stockley

"Breezy freshness, strong masculinity, and almost reckless abandon in the literary texture and dramatic inventions."—*Phila. North American.*

"Has a charm that is difficult to describe."
St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

"A book of many surprises, and a fresh new kind of heroine—strong, sweet, and unconventional."—*St. Paul Pioneer Press.*

"Extremely interesting—so much life, ardor, and color."—*New York Herald.*

"Shows undoubted power."—*N. Y. Times.*

Second Printing

With Frontispiece. \$1.35 net (\$1.50 by mail)

New York G. P. Putnam's Sons London

An ideal love story

THE ROSARY

By Florence L. Barclay

"ONCE in a long while there appears a story like *The Rosary*, in which there is but one adventure, the love of the two real persons superbly capable of love, the sacrifices they make for it, the sorrows it brings them, the exceeding reward. This can only be done by a writer of feeling, of imagination, and of the sincerest art. When it is done, something has been done that justifies the publishing business, refreshes the heart of the reviewer, strengthens faith in the outcome of the great experiment of putting humanity on earth. *The Rosary* is a rare book, a source of genuine delight."—*The Syracuse Post-Standard*.

Crown 8vo. \$1.35 Net. (\$1.50 by mail.)

G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York

London

"An astonishing achievement."

London Times

THE DEVOURERS

By

A. VIVANTI CHARTRES

"HOW refreshing, how pleasant it is to be able to praise a novel unreservedly and to welcome it with grateful admiration. . . . *The Devourers* is a beautiful piece of work. It is life seen through truly adjusted glasses by delicate and penetrating eyes, and set down by one who possesses the greatest asset of a writer—style. . . . The book is full of great things, strangely attractive, dotted with charming phrases which light the story along its varied path. . . . It is too good not to accept with joy."—*London Telegraph*.

"A work of genius."—*Glasgow Herald*

Cr. 8vo. \$1.25 net. (\$1.35 by mail)

New York G. P. Putnam's Sons London







